Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1729. His mother was a Roman Catholic, and his father had conformed to the Protestant Church of Ireland to improve his personal and professional prospects. Edmund Burke attended Trinity College, Dublin, which admitted only Protestant students, and in 1750 entered the Inns of Court in London to receive legal training. His career did not lead him into the law, however, but into literature and politics. In 1756 he published *A Vindication of Natural Society*, followed the next year by *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, a major contribution to aesthetics. He became a close friend of the leading London men of letters.

In 1765, Burke became the private secretary to the Whig marquis of Rockingham, who served briefly as the prime minister. Through Rockingham’s patronage and influence he entered Parliament the same year, remaining for most of his life associated with the Whig opposition to George III and his ministers. For a long period Burke also served as editor of the *Annual Register of the Year’s Events*, a publication that covered contemporary political life. He was the colonial agent for the colony of New York and championed conciliation with the North American colonies during the years leading up to the American Revolution. In 1782, when Rockingham became first lord of the Treasury, Burke was appointed paymaster-general, a position he held under two ministries during 1782 and 1783.

In 1782 Rockingham died, and Burke had a more difficult time in politics thereafter. In the late 1780s he undertook the lead in the controversial House of Commons impeachment proceedings over Warren Hastings’s maladministration of India under the authority of the East India Company. This was not a popular cause. Nor was Burke’s criticism of parliamentary efforts to limit the authority of the monarchy during the regency crisis of 1788–89. Consequently, when the French Revolution commenced in 1789, Burke was neither a popular nor a powerful political figure in Parliament. He was regarded as able but eccentric and unpredictable. Had he died
that year, he would be known today as a significant minor political player in the confused politics of the first half of the reign of George III.

But Burke did not die in 1789. Instead, the next year he intervened in the English debate over French events, publishing *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a book that changed the direction not only of the English debate but also of the wider European debate. The *Reflections* itself was rapidly reprinted in Britain, and it has remained in print ever since. On the continent, French and German translations quickly found a wide readership. Burke, more than any other writer of the day, succeeded in defining for his own and later generations the character of the new political order arising in France and the danger it posed to existing British and European social and political institutions and values. In doing so, he established himself as the chief framer of modern European conservative political thought, formulating a new political stance to confront what he saw as a radical departure in European public life. Because radical political transformations would become one of the chief features not only of European but world history for more than two centuries, Burke’s work established a protean analytical framework for confronting, criticizing, and evaluating revolutionary change far beyond the confines and contours of his original argument. In other words, the manner in which Burke reflected on revolution in France, as well as his particular reflections, gave his polemic staying power. When Burke died in 1797, no other writer of the era of the French Revolution had produced a work of more lasting transatlantic influence.

Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in November 1790, eighteen months after the French Estates General had gathered at Versailles in May 1789 and set off the vast revolutionary upheaval in French political and social life. During those intervening months a series of remarkable events had moved France from a divine right to a constitutional monarchy. Those events included the conversion in June 1789 of the Estates General, organized according to traditional social orders, into the National Assembly, with each member voting as an individual; the fall of the Bastille, the infamous prison associated with royal authority, to the Paris crowds on July 14; and the eruptions of rural riots, known as the Great Fear, in the weeks thereafter. In early August 1789 the nobles sitting in the National Assembly emotionally surrendered many of their traditional feudal rights. Later that month the Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In early October hundreds of Parisians, led by working women from the city, marched on Versailles and compelled Louis XVI and his family to return to Paris. To meet the demands of the government financial crisis, which had forced the calling of the Estates General for
the first time since 1613, the National Assembly in late 1789 confiscated the lands of the French Roman Catholic Church and then issued bonds (assignats) backed by the revenue from church lands to fund the debt. The Assembly then undertook a vast reconstruction of local French administration. In July 1790 the Assembly issued the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which required clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the revolutionary government and effectively turned the French church into a department of the state. Exactly a year after the fall of the Bastille Louis XVI grudgingly accepted a new constitution making him a constitutional monarch. Thus within little more than a year all the major political, administrative, and religious institutions of France had undergone radical change.

It was to those events and the English reception of them, particularly among radical political Protestant Dissenters, that Burke addressed his book. From the moment of its publication the *Reflections* caused enormous controversy and conflict, not only among radical critics such as Thomas Paine but also among those of moderately liberal Whig political conviction with whom Burke had long been allied. In his advocacy of a political philosophy vigorously defending existing institutions, Burke did not retreat from breaking longstanding friendships, splitting his own party, and deserting former political allies. Burke had been famous for his criticism of the British monarch and royal ministers, but now he suddenly became their favorite author. He was apparently abandoning so many of his previous political convictions that old friends wondered about his sanity and his integrity.

Present-day readers (not unlike his contemporaries) often find their initial response to Burke to be one of severe and not wholly unwarranted skepticism and criticism. For example, some years ago in the midst of a class discussion of the *Reflections* a very bright undergraduate remarked, “This book is offensive, really offensive!” He was correct. To read seriously Burke’s anti-revolutionary polemic is to engage with a powerful mind that offends and challenges almost every one of our most cherished modern liberal-democratic political assumptions. Burke provokes our minds, vexes our dispositions, and demands that we think and rethink much that we take for granted in our everyday political outlooks.

Burke challenges us so profoundly because he was challenging himself as well. In his *Reflections* we confront a public political actor of fundamentally liberal values forced by rapidly unfolding events to reconsider his understanding of the preconditions of political liberty. Burke was a liberal carrying out that difficult, self-imposed assignment determined that no one resist his questions, ignore his arguments, or evade his conclusions. But in
the process he not only stirs us from our complacency but offends and puzzles our moral sensibilities because he claims to defend political liberty without addressing what most modern readers regard as the inherent injustices of many eighteenth-century social institutions. In fact, he asserts that by the nature of things many of those injustices cannot be significantly assuaged. Burke defended a social and political status quo that we today find largely indefensible. Yet his argument still draws us and demands our engagement.

Burke’s fundamental intention is the defense and preservation of liberal political institutions against those people who would radically transform them on the basis of theory, philosophical ideas, or what would in contemporary terms be called ideology. He frames this argument as a repudiation of the siren calls of radical utopians, who would sacrifice the good inherent in existing, if imperfect and even inconsistent, political and social arrangements while vainly pursuing an elusive theoretical best, whether defined on the basis of secular ideology or religious ideals. His is the voice of the convinced liberal presenting himself as confronting a dark, dangerous, and ultimately deadly radicalism that has hijacked the vocabulary of political liberty. Consequently, Burke must repeatedly define what he regards as the genuine meaning of such liberty against new definitions that rob it of its very being. To that end he again and again advocates a politics of prudence, restraint, and moderation while warning against the politics of perfectionism. The single-minded refutation of that perfectionism— which within his polemic often includes moderate as well as radical reforms— allows Burke to reconcile himself to factors in the social and political life of his day that seem to us deeply flawed, particularly the kinds of inequality illustrated by his defense of hereditary rights. The imperfect present becomes more or less acceptable in the face of the maddeningly destructive drive to transform it into something more nearly perfect.

To champion prudence over perfection is in and of itself a hard sell, whether in the eighteenth or twenty-first century. Burke did not make this task any easier for himself by his methods, his rhetoric, or his arguments. One element after another in Reflections on the Revolution in France invites us to escape Burke’s argument and to elude his considerable political wisdom. An unrestrained passion infuses his pages and drives his argument while an ornate, distant, unfamiliar rhetoric interferes with the persuasiveness of his presentation—in fact, it almost blocks our access to it. Burke’s pulsating emotion and the rhetorical vehemence of his assault on the political violence in France press the reader to take refuge in the very rationality
he denounces. The reader, like many of Burke’s contemporaries, wants to
declare that things in France and its newly emerging political order really
cannot be all that bad.

Even when modern readers overcome the self-isolating cast of Burke’s
prose, his Reflections still proves perplexing. How can one take seriously a
political commentator who on the one hand flails away against the intellec-
tual giants Voltaire and Rousseau and on the other presents an uncritically
sentimental portrait of Marie Antoinette? How can modern readers from
liberal democratic societies patiently work their way through the ideas of a
writer who so condescendingly describes the French National Assembly as
“viciously or feebly composed,” filled with “obscure provincial advoca-
cates, . . . stewards of petty local jurisdictions, country attornies, notaries,
and the whole train of the ministers of municipal litigation, the fomenters
and conductors of the petty war of village vexation” and “dealers in stocks
and funds,” who behave “like Jew brokers, contending with each other who
could best remedy with fraudulent circulation and depreciated paper the
wretchedness and ruin brought on their country by their degenerate coun-
cils” (35, 36, 37, 41). How can readers who believe in separation of church
and state enter into the thought of a political philosopher who demands that
an established religion stand at the center of the social and political order?
And how again can they take seriously that same philosopher who along-
side the defense of established religion organizes his polemical strategy
around the denunciation of an English Protestant Dissenting minister who
made what seems at worst a politically foolish speech before a relatively
small self-selected audience? How dare we even regard Burke as a philoso-
pher of political liberty when he demands that liberty be understood in
strictly gendered terms of a “manly, moral, regulated liberty” and portrays
France under the revolutionary government as a woman who “has aban-
doned her interest, that she might prostitute her virtue” (7, 32). It is difficult
even for the most sympathetic reader not to smile with regret over Burke’s
praise of the nobility as a “graceful ornament to the civil order” and the
“Corinthian capital of polished society” (117). Perhaps most offensive in
his hostility to equality Burke forthrightly denounces what he terms “that
monstrous fiction, which, by inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into
men destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life, serves only to
aggravate and imbitter that real inequality, which it can never remove; and
which the order of civil life establishes as much for the benefit of those
whom it must leave in an humble state, as those whom it is able to exalt to a
condition more splendid, but not more happy” (32).
No, Burke does not make engagement with his thought easy, but then again neither does any great political philosopher, if taken seriously. One need only recall Plato’s banishment of poets, Aristotle’s defense of natural slavery, Machiavelli’s advocacy of violence, and Rousseau’s idea of forcing men to be free. The alternative to coming to terms with Burke is, however, to pursue a life of illusory, complacently unreflective political conviction and all too vulnerable unarticulated commitment to liberal democracy lacking a recognition of the elements of liberal thought and polity that exist in often uneasy tension. For all his emphasis on feeling, Burke demands that the political liberal think critically about liberal values and recognize that within the long tradition of Western liberal political thought there has existed considerable strain between freedom and order, between liberty and equality, between religious and racial toleration and the desire for social conformity. He argues that we must recognize that no matter how much we treasure each liberal value, situations may arise in which we shall require one to trump another. Furthermore, Burke contends that, as put into practice, liberal political values require supplementary moral values, a general appreciation of social orderliness, willingness to acknowledge social hierarchy, and a temperament embracing moderation and restraint. Not to recognize those often-difficult truths is for Burke to leave ourselves victims of sentimentality and to abandon tough political analysis.

Karl Marx, that most unsentimental of writers, surprisingly provides one avenue to recognizing the importance of Burke’s critique of the revolution in France. Marx essentially, if unhappily, agreed with Burke about the power of inherited circumstances on political life. In a famous passage of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), he wrote, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Whether seen as Marx’s nightmare or Burke’s inherited wisdom, the past realizing and asserting itself in the present could not be escaped. Marx also understood that at moments of vast political and social transformation most human beings would revert to familiar categories of understanding and analysis. Both Burke and Marx demand that new ideas and sensibilities confront radically changed circumstances. What is usually regarded as penetrating insight in Marx cannot be regarded as bigotry in Burke. In effect, Marx’s comment explains the point of departure for Burke’s unremitting assault on Richard Price.

Price was an English Unitarian Dissenter. As such he was a respectable
and even distinguished figure in his own religious community and on the
English radical political landscape. On November 4, 1789, in the Old Jewry
Meeting House in London he delivered a political discourse before the
Society for Commemorating the Revolution, by which was meant the En-
glish Revolution of 1688. He spoke as a radical political Protestant Dis-
senter addressing fellow radical political Protestant Dissenters. For many
years such English Dissenters had been demanding the removal of a variety
of very real religiously determined civil disabilities and advocating the
cause of parliamentary reform, which they saw as the vehicle for redressing
religious discrimination. Many, including Price, voiced their demands in
the language of universal rights rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and
rhetoric. Consequently, in their political agenda the language of political
radicalism and religious liberty had become conflated. Furthermore, be-
cause English Unitarians had emerged as the leading political spokesmen
among Protestant Dissenters, political radicalism had become linked to
religious heterodoxy.

Price thus discussed the events in France through the standard, indeed
virtually traditional, categories of the politically engaged Protestant Dis-
senter whose own denomination was identified with rational religion. Long
determined to expand religious and political liberty in England, he looked
opportunistically to the French Revolution as an occasion to voice political
complaints and aspirations for radical reform in Britain, much as he and
other Dissenters had viewed the American Revolution. At one point in his
discourse, Price declared,

What an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to see it;
and I could almost say, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in
peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. I have lived to see a
diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error—
I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and
nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it.—I
have lived to see Thirty Millions of people, indignant and resolute,
spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice;
their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself
to his subjects.—After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have
been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious.—
And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a
general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings
changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving
way to the dominion of reason and conscience.
In this exuberant passage Price drew into a single line of descent the English Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution, and the immediate turmoil in France. Shortly before he spoke, that last upheaval had momentarily culminated with the crowd of Parisians marching on Versailles, milling around the palace overnight, and then forcing King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette, and their children to return to Paris—the event that Burke and others believed Price extolled as “their king led in triumph and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects.” Moreover, as a rational Protestant speaking to a rational Protestant audience, Price had no difficulty commending the assault that had already occurred on the property of the French Roman Catholic Church as the “dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.” In all of these comments Price embodied the British Enlightenment with its peculiar combination of political liberalism, rational religion, and anti-Catholicism.

Price, whose discourse had elicited hostile replies before Burke’s, was not badly intentioned, but he was exceptionally naïve. He was, of course, not alone in such naïveté. Across Europe numerous commentators swept up in the enthusiasm of the early revolution praised its events. Many later academic historians would effectively follow Price and his contemporaries in their general approval of the French Revolution, downplaying or even approving its destructiveness, anticlericalism, property confiscation, state violence against French citizens, and ultimate military despotism. This view would prevail so effectively that as late as the close of the twentieth century the gifted historian Simon Schama could write a narrative history of the French Revolution that became spectacularly successful largely by recognizing the revolutionary violence and noting that a good time had not been had by all. Resistance to recognition of the fate of the Roman Catholic Church in France, the later reign of terror, the absence of law and due process, and the final Napoleonic military dictatorship has been essential to resistance to Burke’s analysis and arguments regarding the French Revolution.

Embracing within his own utopian vision the French Revolution, Price in late 1789 ignored its already present urban and rural violence and implicitly approved the confiscation of ecclesiastical land. In his self-appointed role of championing events in France, Price was the forerunner of so many later, otherwise peaceful, even personally timid, intellectuals in the West who from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution to the revolutionary disturbances in the former colonial world to the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, would voice support for violence and terror or demand that it be “understood” as somehow justified or even deserved in
the larger order of things. To be fair, Price had much more excuse than his latter-day emulators. Moreover, beyond his immediate political concerns Price analyzed contemporary political transformations within the framework of a Christian millennialism that interpreted what its adherents considered to be progressive political movements as leading to the second coming of Jesus Christ. In that respect Price was both a political and a religious utopian visionary, though to be sure a person more moderate in behavior than in rhetoric.

Burke, by contrast, was almost from the beginning skeptical, if not yet actively hostile, toward events in France. As early as August 1789 he wrote of “our astonishment at the wonderful Spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country” and which displayed “something in it paradoxical and Mysterious.” He was initially uncertain whether the explosion of the “old Parisian ferocity” would prove temporary or point to permanent change. If the latter, he thought the French “not fit for Liberty” and requiring “a Strong hand like that of their former masters to coerce them.” In this same context he noted, “Men must have a certain fund of natural moderation to qualify them for Freedom, else it become noxious to themselves and a perfect Nuisance to every body else.”

Burke stood convinced that a temperament of moderation must exist before political liberty could be secured rather than expecting such moderation to emerge from the exercise of social and administrative confusion wrongly termed liberty. It did not take him long to conclude that the revolution in France would end badly for both that country and others as well. He was particularly convinced that such would be the case if the ideas and ideals of the new French government were transported to Britain as Price advocated in his address.

It is not at all easy to appreciate the act of political imagination required on Burke’s part to see the French turmoil as something genuinely and destructively new on the European political scene. Across the continent the politics and social life of the second half of the eighteenth century had involved a good deal of domestic violence and tumult. In this respect there were many precedents for the individual elements of political activity occurring in the early months of what would soon be called the French Revolution, particularly precedents for efforts at aristocratic constitutional innovation limiting monarchical authority, for public rioting, for peasant uprisings, and for anticlericalism. Burke himself had been one of the foremost critics of the authority and patronage of the British monarchy. During the 1760s Britain had witnessed public riots of a distinctly political character over the seating of John Wilkes in Parliament, and in the late 1770s a much-expanded public politics in the Yorkshire Association Movement for
parliamentary reform. Religion had also provided a subject for public disruption and resistance. In 1780 London had been devastated by the anti-Catholic Gordon riots, which resulted in several hundred deaths. Across Europe popular urban riots sparked by bread and food prices, as two generations of social historians have now demonstrated, were part and parcel of eighteenth-century European political life. To some the disturbances surrounding the fall of the Bastille looked like one more such riot. At the other end of the political spectrum Joseph II of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia had used state power to confiscate church lands and to demand greater accountability from the church toward those over whom it ministered, thus setting precedents for the ecclesiastical actions of the French National Assembly. Furthermore, many European observers, including Burke, had regarded the social tensions in France as more embittered than elsewhere on the continent and as likely to lead to severe difficulties. Consequently, one can sympathize with the plight of European politicians and political commentators who throughout 1789 and 1790 attempted to bring into focus the events in France through existing categories for comprehending contemporary political behavior.

Burke, earlier than most, understood differently the situation unfolding in France. He did so in part because he had for so long been a critic of English political life, but a critic who knew bounds. As demonstrated by his momentous defense of the presence of parties in English political life, he did not shrink from debate and sharp criticism. But offering criticism was different from overturning the political and social order. Burke had denounced business as usual in English politics, the authority of an overreaching monarchy, and the ambitions of a self-perpetuating aristocracy not in order to reject those institutions but to redirect them toward different policies and new inclusiveness. He had never wanted to upset the political apple cart; he had wanted to influence its direction. From his own experience Burke recognized the difference between the reformer, no matter how outspoken, and the radical, no matter how rational.

Burke was also familiar with the details of government and administration in which for his entire political career he had immersed himself. His position as agent for the American colony of New York, his dissection of the civil lists of the British monarchy, and his crusade against Warren Hastings’s maladministration in India prepared him to understand the implications of the wholesale administrative changes being undertaken in France. He understood that the devil resided not only in the details of administration but, more important, in ignoring those administrative details.

Just as the Gordon Riots had convinced Burke of the dangers of mob
violence and anti-Catholicism, his political experiences in the decade just prior to the publication of his *Reflections*, when he had found himself politically isolated, had made him skeptical of the motivations of parliamentary politicians. Parliamentary resistance to what he saw as overwhelming moral improprieties in the behavior of Warren Hastings in India made him doubt whether parliamentary legislators could provide for a moral empire. The debates of 1788 and 1789 over the regency necessitated by the mental illness of George III raised suspicions in his mind about the ambitions of parliamentary leaders who he thought improperly attempted to supplant the monarch’s authority for their own partisan ends. He carried all of these doubts and hard-won skepticism to his analysis of the politicians in the French National Assembly and of the limitations he saw them imposing on Louis XVI.

Second, Burke, as an Irish outsider eager to be admitted to the corridors of English power, had a deep sensitivity to the exercise of arbitrary authority. He knew that political and social authority, especially when undergirded by ideas, had the capacity to destroy and distort lives. He had seen personally the impact of the English anti-Catholic penal laws in Ireland. There, in the history of that nation and in the experience of his own family, especially in his father’s conversion to the Protestant Church of Ireland, he had experienced a political regime that self-consciously ignored the customs, manners, and religion of a people for the sake of imposing its own religious ideas, values, and ambitions. The English ideological championing of Protestantism in Ireland had meant the ongoing degradation of the Irish Roman Catholic majority, and Burke saw a similar situation beginning to unfold in France. There were also parallels in France to the contempt for local social and religious values that Burke had previously seen in Warren Hastings’s misgovernment of India.

Third, from the Irish experience and from having lived through the Gordon Riots, Burke knew the powerfully destructive force of anti-Catholicism. He loathed and distrusted it, whether manifested in the rational religion of the Enlightenment or in the bigotry of Puritan Protestants. This recognition is one of the sources of his frequent and, to many readers, surprising equation of the Enlightenment and Protestantism, though, as Darrin M. McMahon argues later in this volume, there were others.

English Protestants, including the most liberal, rational, and otherwise moderate figures, considered Roman Catholicism to be a foreboding, superstitious other to which neither charity nor toleration should be extended. Within this outlook liberal English Protestants overlapped French anticlerical *philosophes*, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Helvetius — Burke’s
“literary caballers and intriguing philosophers” (10)—with whom otherwise they had little in common. In turn, both the liberal English Protestants and the philosophes shared the anticlerical outlooks that had allowed the monarchies of Eastern Europe to move arbitrarily against the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches in their domains.

Consequently, in the early policies of the French revolutionary government toward the French Roman Catholic Church and its property, Burke saw embodied three destructive political tendencies—bigotry, anticlericalism, and arbitrary government. From his standpoint the policies of the revolutionary French government toward the French Roman Catholic Church differed little from the policy of the English government toward Roman Catholicism in Ireland. The one had and the other would produce political tyranny and human degradation all in the name of rationality.

Finally, Burke was not only a person of political life and ambition. He was also a man of letters and one of the foremost writers of the age on aesthetics. He understood from the study of history and literature, the observation of art, and the exploration of his own personality that human nature is not coextensive with rationality. He stands in the tradition of the great skeptics from Montaigne to Pascal to Hume. Although rightly identified as a critic of the Enlightenment—indeed, through his criticism almost its conceptual inventor—Burke was also in reality a student of the deeper Enlightenment that understood the complexity of human action and the inability to reduce human nature to the embodiment of reason alone. Having absorbed so much of Enlightenment pessimism and doubt about the capacity of human reason to address the human situation or guide human events, Burke would have agreed with D’Alembert in the Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia: “Barbarism lasts for centuries; it seems that it is our natural element; reason and good taste are only passing.” It was because Burke was so much a man of the Enlightenment that he could so deeply and passionately condemn its distortion into the heady utopianism of the revolutionary era. In this as in so many elements of the Reflections, the reader stands witness to a lovers’ quarrel.

What Burke grasped, and the hapless Price did not, was that the events in France, whether urban and rural violence or new constitutional departures or confiscation of ecclesiastical property, could not be domesticated onto either the English or the larger European political landscape. They marked a new departure in things political not only for France but for Europe. As he wrote in 1791, “The present revolution in France seems to me to be quite of another character and description; and to bear little resemblance or analogy to any of those which have been brought about in Europe, upon principles
merely political. *It is a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma.* It has a much greater resemblance to those changes which have been made upon religious grounds, in which the spirit of proselytism makes an essential part.”

It had been the example of Price’s having succumbed to the proselytism of the French ideology and then having prescribed it for England that had stirred Burke to write, and to write with such intensity. From his standpoint Price’s sermon demonstrated that within months of its outbreak the ideas of the French Revolution had begun to jump over political boundaries.

When the new French constitutionalism — which was based on the ideology of the rights of man reaching from the highest to the most minute units of the nation — combined with urban rioting, agrarian unrest, a wholesale reorganization of the church and confiscation of its property, and a direct assault on the king and queen, anything even resembling often disruptive eighteenth-century politics overran its channels. Each of these distinct events reinforced and magnified the impact of the others. To be sure, as Timothy Tackett had eloquently argued, there may have been nothing inevitable in the failure of the constitutional monarchy structured by the National Assembly, but Burke foresaw that once so many different factors came into play, contingency itself was in the ascendant. Under such conditions he believed that one tumultuous event would give rise to another because so many former safeguards against widespread and destructive change were removed. As he wrote in another, later attack on the French Revolution, “The world of contingency and political combination is much wider than we are apt to imagine.”

Events proved Burke correct, but the enduring power of his analysis of revolutionary change — change such as Europe had not witnessed since the Reformation — does not lie in the success of his predictions. It resides rather in the conceptual structure of his argument against the French Revolution. Burke’s argument achieved lasting authority because even though he directed it against the revolution in France, he shaped it as a more general criticism of arbitrary political power informed by a zeal for ideas that over the course of the next two centuries would assume many different guises. The French Revolution for Burke thus represented a vast particular manifestation of a potentially still more vast and general political danger. In that regard Burke was genuinely reflecting on the revolution in France and not simply reacting to it. It is his reflection, not his reaction, that has given his book its perennial relevance.

Burke equated the revolution being carried out in France through the National Assembly with a self-consciously arbitrary and tyrannical rejection of experience, tradition, historical precedent, religion, and natural
social hierarchy that emerged from destructively rationalistic writings of the Enlightenment philosophes. In turn he directly associated this radical rationalism, which he projected onto the minds of the revolutionaries, with the mechanical philosophy that had undergirded European science and natural knowledge, as well as much philosophy, since the middle of the seventeenth century. This mode of framing the events and sources of the French Revolution proved enormously influential in Britain and across the continent. After Burke, many conservative political polemicists as well as less engaged commentators simply assumed that the Enlightenment had embodied mechanistic thought, reductionist materialism, vehement anticlericalism, and a mindless rationalism that ignored the deeper elements of human nature and over time fostered political upheaval leading to an absence of restraint on political authority. Only in the middle of the twentieth century would intellectual historians directly challenge those assumptions about the Enlightenment.∞≥

There is, however, a generally unrecognized paradox in Burke’s lasting, influential attack on the mechanical philosophy of nature and his equation of it with radical politics, extreme rationalism, materialism, and atheism. The mechanical philosophy associated with Newtonian science and with the experimental philosophy of Robert Boyle arose in seventeenth-century England in direct opposition to the French philosophy of science forged by René Descartes, whom Newton and his English contemporaries rightly or wrongly regarded as both materialistic and atheistic. Throughout the eighteenth century the mechanical, experimental approach to science—widely denoted as Newtonianism and popularized both by English writers and by Voltaire in his Letters on England (1733)—embraced theism, toleration, and moderate political liberty. Furthermore, it was seen as one of the underpinnings of English political stability. Except in the minds of a few late-century French authors, the mechanical philosophy had been anything but the materialistic vision of human and physical nature that Burke ascribed to the term. Nor had the mechanical philosophy been associated with political tyranny. This confusion and conflation on Burke’s part constitute a problem in his thought requiring a solution.

That solution lies in the double impact of seventeenth-century English political experience on Burke’s thinking. First, much of Burke’s prescience about the character and course of the French Revolution stemmed directly from his understanding of the events of the English Civil War. There a radical political ideology infused with Protestant Puritan theology had overturned the monarchy, Parliament, and the English Church. These seventeenth-century parallels to events in late eighteenth-century France
explain Burke’s understanding of political revolution shaped and driven by ideas overturning ancient political and religious institutions. In the French context the Enlightenment philosophes, whose thought informs the destructively radical National Assembly, play the part of the zealously radical Puritans. In the late-eighteenth-century English context Price personifies a latter-day Puritan zealot whose ideas, if actually carried out, would result in a modern English revolution replicating that of the mid-seventeenth century. The philosophes in France and the Prices in Britain provided the corrosive criticism undermining faith and confidence in the status quo. Moreover, Burke’s prediction of the inevitable coming of military despotism to France also had its forerunner in the English Civil War when the short-lived Puritan Republic gave way to a military regime and the eventual arbitrary rule of Oliver Cromwell.

While the pattern of the English Civil War accounted in part for the manner in which Burke framed his understanding of the revolution in France, a second, unnamed seventeenth-century political presence must also have filled his mind when he denounced the application of rationalistic, atheistic, mechanical philosophy to politics as resulting in despotism. That presence, not specifically noted in the *Reflections*, was the specter of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651). What Burke deplored in his particular characterization of the policies of the new French government was their embodiment of the absolutist state about which Hobbes had theorized. Throughout his public and private writings Burke makes almost no references to Hobbes. Yet in *Leviathan* Hobbes had projected an all-powerful state created on the bases of rational analysis, a mechanistically materialistic philosophy of nature, the rejection of history and tradition, the repudiation of practical experience, and explicit anticlericalism. What Burke attacked in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was a novel political regime across the channel that he portrayed as having realized the unrestrained Hobbesian state.

Only Hobbes among previous English political philosophers had articulated a thoroughly rational, mechanical philosophy of politics, and he had done so to defend the concept of an all-powerful sovereign. Hobbes had generated his sovereign through a geometric analysis of human nature and human social psychology whereby he defined his own terms for his own purposes, rejecting the touchstone of experience, history, and Aristotelian scholastic philosophy. Repudiating both natural law and common law, Hobbes argued that no law existed prior to the contract establishing his political sovereign, whose commands constitute the only law that Hobbes recognizes as valid. In that respect the legal framework for society represented
a blank slate, and the new sovereign created that framework after his subjects agreed to the contract assigning authority to the sovereign. For all intents and purposes Hobbes permitted no appeal from decisions of the sovereign, nor significant guaranteed due process. Furthermore, throughout the latter half of *Leviathan* Hobbes makes clear that one motive deeply informing his political philosophy was the eradication of religion, especially Roman Catholicism, as a center of political and cultural authority capable of challenging and undermining the authority of the state.

The character of political authority that Burke projected upon the revolutionary French government and then systematically denounced was exactly the kind of authority that Hobbes had claimed for his sovereign. This construction on Burke’s part is what accounts for the perennial power of his thought. He was not attacking the momentary politics and policies of the French Revolution but rather the larger despotic Hobbesian political vision based on rationality, mechanism, materialism, and anticlericalism. It was Hobbes, like the members of the French National Assembly after him, who had thought he could construct a state in disregard of the generations of human experience and religious faith and practice that had preceded him. Of all the political “men of theory” (35) so distrusted by Burke, Hobbes was the greatest.

From the moment of its publication commentators had heaped accusations of materialism, atheism, mechanism, and tyranny on Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and on the obvious intellectual arrogance that informed it. As a result of those critiques, by the middle of the eighteenth century David Hume could conclude, “Hobbes’s politics are fitted only to promote tyranny, and his ethics to encourage licentiousness. Though an enemy to religion, he partakes nothing of the spirit of scepticism; but is as positive and dogmatical as if human reason, and his reason in particular, could attain a thorough conviction in these subjects.” From the comments of Hume and others Burke could assume that Hobbes’s dogmatic philosophy had been effectively repulsed. Indeed, Burke did in 1765 state that Hobbes had been ably refuted during the previous century. Thus to the extent that Burke could frame the revolution in France as a realization of Hobbesian politics, he could critique it on the same grounds that Hobbes so far as the eighteenth century was concerned had been thoroughly refuted. Virtually no writer of the Enlightenment actually resembled Hobbes, but Burke caricatured and castigated the philosophes as if they were Hobbesians or as if their thought necessarily led to Hobbesian conclusions.

It is significant that Burke’s assault on the ideas he presents as informing the revolution in France echoes one of Hobbes’s most articulate
seventeenth-century critics—Bishop John Bramhall of the Church of Ireland. Although there is no direct evidence that he drew upon Bramhall, it is certainly possible that as a young Irishman studying at Trinity College, Dublin, Burke might have read Bramhall’s critique of Hobbes. From such study he could easily have concluded that Hobbes and his tyrannical politics of rational reductionism had been effectively defeated.

In a work of 1658 provocatively entitled “The Catching of Leviathan, or the Great Whale,” Bramhall criticized Hobbes’s entire materialist metaphysics and his theory of society based on self-preservation as antithetical to a proper understanding of both God and man. Bramhall accused Hobbes of having “devised for us a trimne Commonwealth, which is neither founded upon religion towards God, nor justice towards man, but merely upon self interest, and self preservation.” Bramhall found Hobbes’s proposed formation of a government without reference to religion deeply wanting. For Bramhall, because of the presence of “raies of heavenly light, those natural seeds of religion which God himself hath imprinted in the heart of man,” it naturally followed that “without religion, Societies are but like soapy bubbles, quickly dissolved.” In parallel with Bramhall’s thought, Burke would claim, “We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort. . . . We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long” (77). Furthermore, just as Burke believed laws of society and behavior predated the government and that government was part of a larger eternal contract, Bramhall affirmed, “Adam had a law written in his heart by the finger of God, before there was any civil law.” Those who along with Hobbes would project a state, politics, and law without reference to divine things thereby “endeavour to make goodnesse, and justice, and honesty, and conscience, and God himself, to be empty names without any reality, which signifie nothing, further than they conduce to a mans [sic] interest.”

Bramhall also equated the concept of Hobbesian sovereignty whereby the sovereign alone determined what was and was not law with ancient sophistry, the same accusation Burke leveled against the French Revolution. In this regard Bramhall stated that according to Hobbes, “What the law-giver commands is to be accounted good, what he forbids bad. This was just the garb of the Athenian Sophisters, as described by Plato. Whatsoever pleased the great beast [the multitude] they called holy, and just, and good. And whatsoever the great beast disliked, they called evill, unjust, prophane.” Burke saw the revolutionary government in France carrying
out the same nihilistic project of defining and redefining terms to their own selfish ends as “politicians of metaphysics . . . have opened schools for sophistry and made establishments for anarchy” (190). As portrayed in ancient political philosophy and history, democracies guided through leaders educated by the shallow but ambitious sophists, like the sovereign projected in Leviathan, embodied will unrestrained by law, ethics, religion, or tradition. Such was exactly Burke’s image of the French Revolution in 1790, and it would become even more his view as time passed. It was on the basis of those longstanding critiques of the ancient sophists and Greek democracy upon which Bramhall and others had drawn before him that Burke would declare, “A perfect democracy is . . . the most shameless thing in the world. As it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearless” (80).

As fundamental to Bramhall’s attack on Hobbes as it was to Burke’s on the revolution in France was the denunciation of geometric and mechanical political reasoning that made no reference to experience or concrete circumstance. For Bramhall such a priori reasoning undergirded all Hobbes’s faults. Bramhall in his critique of Hobbes, like Burke after him, determinedly emphasized the necessity of an appeal to experience in politics:

State policy, which is wholly involved in matter, and circumstances of time, and place, and persons, is not at all like Arithmetick and Geometry, which are altogether abstracted from matter, but much more like Tennis-play. There is no place for liberty in Arithmetick and Geometry, but in policy there is, and so there is in Tennis-play. A game at Tennis hath its vicissitudes, and so have States. A Tennis plaier must change his play at every stroke, according to the occasion and accidents: so must a Statesman move his rudder differently, according to the various faces of heaven. He who manageth a Common-wealth by general rules, will quickly ruine both himself, and those who are committed to his government. . . . In summe, general rules are easie, and signifie not much in policy. The quintessence of policy doth consist in the dexterous and skilful application of those rules to the subject matter. Bramall repeatedly denigrated Hobbes’s refusal to look at political life as something necessarily drawing on purposeful experience, declaring: “Experience the Mistrisse of fooles, is the best, and almost the onely proof of the goodnesse or badnesse of any form of government. No man knoweth where a shooe wringeth, so well as he that weareth it. A new Physitian must have a new Church-yard, wherein to bury those whom he killeth. And a new unexperienced Politician, commonly putteth all into a combustion.”
is exactly the spirit that informs Burke’s long, specific criticisms of the new French political and administrative arrangements that fill the second half of *Reflections*. Time after time Burke brings the same accusation of the ignoring of experience against the novel departures in France. He saw the policies and outlooks of the revolution bursting the boundaries of all existing institutions and setting out in untried and therefore distinctly dangerous directions. For Burke, resisting the temptation to construct a society from the ground up on the basis of untested rationality was the beginning of political wisdom and the essence of political prudence. The leaders of the new French government had fallen prey to that temptation, with the result that, as Burke told a correspondent in 1791, the French Revolution “is a revolt of innovation, and thereby the very elements of Society have been confounded and dissipated.”

Burke argued that the most radical and destructive features of the French revolutionaries stemmed from their reliance upon theory rather than upon experience and pragmatic goals to shape and justify policies. He had long generally opposed “Visionary Politicians,” who suggested schemes of radical change in the British electoral system based on what he regarded as first principles rather than on an appreciation for history and circumstances. He associated visionary politics with the imposition of innovations that failed to take into account the concrete details of political and social life. Indeed in his opinion the imposition of administrative innovation upon the North American colonies had been one of the causes of the American Revolution. Burke believed that political decisions should be made in terms of reference to concrete circumstance that would inherently restrain the political actor in a fashion that an open-ended theory would not. At one point in the *Reflections* he declared,

> I cannot conceive how any man can have brought himself to that pitch of presumption, to consider his country as nothing but carte blanche, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases. A man full of warm, speculative benevolence may wish his society otherwise constituted than he finds it, but a good patriot, and a true politician, always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country. A disposition to preserve and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Everything else is vulgar in the conception, perilous in the execution. (133)

Burke embraced an “ability to improve” on the part of the wise statesman. But to see one’s country as a blank space open to any manner of political
scribbling was to permit the exercise of the most extreme modes of tyranny—tyranny to which no significant or principled resistance was possible. It was just this lesson that the Irish had so painfully learned. Undoubtedly with the Irish precedent in mind he declared, “It is impossible not to observe that, in the spirit of this geometrical distribution and arithmetical arrangement, these pretended citizens treat France exactly like a country of conquest” (155). For a government to abandon any one set of prescriptive rights opened the path to abandoning any and all prescriptive rights. Such had been the direction of the policies of the French Revolution, the behavior of Warren Hastings, the seventeenth-century Cromwellian Puritan commonwealth, and the vision of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

Within the *Reflections* Burke worked through this issue with particular regard to the property rights of the French Catholic Church. As John Pocock has so ably argued, Burke saw the French government undertaking a disastrous policy of flooding the nation with paper money backed in theory by the confiscated church lands. A double robbery had resulted: the church lost land and the bondholders received worthless paper. It is important, however, to see why Burke regarded the confiscation of the property of the French Church by the National Assembly as such a heinous act. In 1793 he told a correspondent, “It is the contempt of Property, and the setting up against its principle, certain pretended advantages of the State, (which by the way exists only for its conservation) that has led to all the other Evils which have ruined France, and brought all Europe into the most imminent danger. The beginning of the whole mischief was a false Idea, that there is a difference in property according to the description of the persons who hold it under the Laws, and that the despoiling a Minister of Religion is not the same Robbery with the Pillage of other Men.” Burke was convinced that once a government had confiscated one form of property, in this case that of the French Church, for ill-defined national purposes there would in principle exist no possibility of restraint against other confiscation. Through the confiscation of ecclesiastical property Burke saw the French Revolution as having subverted “that order of things under which our part of the world has so long flourished, and indeed been in a progressive State of improvement, the Limits of which, if it had not been thus rudely stopped, it would not have been easy for the imagination to fix.” The French government had begun to tread a path of the most profound kind of public corruption. What the revolution by its example had demonstrated “for the first time in the History of the world” was “that it is very possible to subvert the whole Frame and order of the best constructed States by corrupting the common people with the Spoil of the superior Classes.” A democracy that allowed
one mode of confiscation would quickly approve others, and all longstand-
ing social arrangements would collapse.

Burke’s premise that government exists to conserve property echoes
John Locke, though perhaps not on Lockean principles, as well as vir-
tually all other eighteenth-century British political philosophers, and also
states one of the fundamental principles of both eighteenth- and nineteenth-
century liberal politics. A government confiscating property stood in con-
tradiction to the most basic purpose of government. A government that
failed to protect property in goods or persons could not and presumably
would not protect other rights, because property was regarded as including
one’s person as well as one’s goods. If a government moved arbitrarily to
deprive of its property a particular group of persons or a particular corporate
institution, such as the church, there would in principle be no end of the
matter. Bad political actors could always find good reasons for evil be-
havior. The real problem for Burke was the evil inherent in human passion
as much as the wrongs associated with any particular policy. At one point
he urged,

History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the
world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy,
ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites, which shake
the public with the same

— troublous storms that toss
The private state, and render life unsweet.

These vices are the causes of those storms. Religion, morals, laws,
prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men are the pretexts. The
pretexts are always found in some specious appearance of a real good.

Burke never doubted that in the realm of politics and power human beings
would devise one apparently good pretext after another to justify deeds that
harmed both individuals and the collective society. Like Hume before him,
Burke understood that reason is the slave of the passions.

There is much less of a specifically antidemocratic impetus to Burke’s
view of the sacredness of property than might first appear in the pages of the
Reflections. The behavior of the French National Assembly was the problem
at hand, but Burke believed that any unrestrained government, whether a de-
mocracy or an over-powerful monarchy, could destroy a society through il-
licit confiscation of property. Such confiscation had been the mark of earlier
tyrrannical European governments — and most of those were monarchies —
from at least the opening of the sixteenth century. Much as he opposed the policies of the new French regime, Burke was no less deeply skeptical of the policies of the absolutist monarchs of Eastern Europe on exactly the same grounds of their disregard for private property. They had after all confiscated ecclesiastical lands in their own realms well before the rise of the revolutionary French government. Less than a year after the publication of the Reflections Burke told his son, “The Truth is, I am afraid, that the Emperor [Leopold II] and some of his Ministers though he does not approve; (as he cannot approve) of the destruction of the monarchy, is infinitely pleased with the Robbery of the Church property and the humiliation of the Gentry [in France]; and that in that lust of philosophick spoliation, and equalization, he forgets that he cuts down the supports of Monarchy, and indeed destroys those principles of property, order and regularity for which alone any rational man can wish Monarchy to exist.” For Burke, the elites of any nation as well as others lower in the social scale supported monarchical government not on the grounds of its sacredness but because it preserved property.

In the same letter Burke declared that as much as he detested all that had occurred in France, he could “not actively, or with a good heart, and clear conscience, go to the establishment of a monarchical despotism in the place of this system of Anarchy.” Burke then briefly outlined his own list of not inconsiderable or insignificant reforms for a French monarchy restored to a position of authority more nearly like that prior to the early summer of 1789. For Burke those reforms included the abolition of letters of Cachet and other modes of arbitrary imprisonment, taxation through an elected Estates General in consultation with the monarchy, restoration of public credit, and creation of a synod governing the Gallican Church. Moreover, everyone participating in government, including the monarch, should swear a declaration in support of such arrangements. These were clearly the sentiments of a prudent reformer, not a blind reactionary.

Burke, moreover, would have been among the last to defend the manner in which the existing property arrangements in any particular society had come into being. He fully recognized that both violence and unfairness had been part and parcel of the process. Yet he was not one to believe that in any single present generation all or even most past wrongs could or should be set aright unless the immediate and lasting benefits of such compensation far outweighed the difficulties likely to be incurred. Significant transformation or readjustment of property arrangements would in all likelihood breed instability and probable injustice worse, in Burke’s view, than what he saw as the ancient injustices associated with the acquisition of property. In all
these respects, he distinctly and consciously rejected the politics of perfection and instead explicitly embraced a politics of admitted imperfection. Indeed, he forthrightly stated, “The rights of men in governments are their advantages; and these are often in balances between differences of good; in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil” (52).

The pursuit of a theoretical or abstract politics that Burke saw at work in regard to church lands would also in his view effectively lead not only to social upheaval but also to political and moral nihilism. As previously noted, Burke, like most English writers, understood one’s own personhood and body to be a mode of property and thus considered that what had begun as confiscation of church lands could end in the deprivation of citizens’ lives by the revolutionary state. Nowhere in the Reflections did he more strikingly or controversially make that point than in the famous—or, for some, infamous—passage about Marie Antoinette. There Burke recalled the French queen as he had seen her when she was about twenty. At the conclusion of his description, he declared, “But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever” (65). Upon reading a draft of this passage one of Burke’s close friends accused him of composing lines that amounted to nothing less than “pure foppery.”≥≠ Furious at the comment, which ended the friendship, Burke replied, “It is for those who applaud or palliate assassination, regicide, and base insults to Women of illustrious place, to prove the Crimes in the sufferers which they allege to justifye their own.”≥∞ Since that time the judgment of Burke’s emotional rhetoric has depended upon longstanding, largely unexamined hostility toward Marie Antoinette, who did, of course, meet her death by judicial execution, an event rarely decried even by modern liberal opponents of capital punishment or defenders of women’s rights.

To allow oneself, however, to become distracted by considerations of the alleged moral failures of Marie Antoinette, about which the biographer Antonia Fraser has raised considerable doubt, is to ignore Burke’s larger argument.≥≤ He believed that what was at stake in the degradation of the French queen by the Paris crowd in October 1789 had involved something else—a “revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” (69). Burke, like so many other eighteenth-century writers, including Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, believed that manners and morals predated and provided contours for political structures and social expectations that could both mitigate the necessity of certain political authority and curb its excessive exercise. The alternative to the exercise of personal restraint
through manners and morals was the increase of formal repression on the part of the state.

Furthermore, for more than a century the ideals and values of the honnête homme in France and the rise of respectability throughout northwestern Europe and Britain had brought new modes of self-restraint to everyday life. The power of manners and morals often associated with the recent expansion of consumption and the values of a consumer society as well as with the more traditional structures of aristocratic inheritance and politesse had become very powerful forces. In thus appealing to manners and morals and “the spirit of a gentleman” (67) Burke was not indulging some kind of effete rhetoric but appealing both to the traditional view of gentility associated with inherited wealth and title and to a more recently emerging and expanding social reality of respectability that could make less necessary the exercise of policing authority by the state. Both of these stood abandoned in the violence of the revolution.

In reflecting on the aftermath of the humiliation of the royal family, Burke, in a passage that as Paul Fussell once noted owes much to Swift’s description of a naked Gulliver discovering his resemblance to the vicious Yahoos, declared: But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimate, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. (66)

If the influence of manners and morals were removed by critical rationality, then there will be little left to restrain human actions toward violence because the spirit of restraint that Burke associated with the spirit of the gentleman would along with learning be “cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude” (68). Harsh and distasteful as that last notorious phrase may be, it did come from the pen of an author who had personally witnessed the Gordon Riots and read in detail of the French urban riots and rural uprisings that during 1789 had involved mutilation of the bodies of the victims of crowd violence.

The multitude in Burke’s view was not inherently swinish, but became
so when all the informal restraints of prescriptive social practice and deferential expectations were removed or dissolved. If manners and morals with all their salutary illusions did not partially restrict human behavior, then that behavior would become swinish and destructive, eventually calling forth the violently repressive force of the state. At the end of the day Burke knew that coercion lies behind all government but that the degree of visible, direct, formal coercion or policing depends upon the extent to which other nonpolitical values, manners, morals, and institutions support orderly life.

Yet even in this remarkable passage regretting the dissolution of shared social expectations, one could still insist that Burke was simply indulging the sentimental deference of a young provincial Irishman beguiled by the beauties of that royal and aristocratic culture he had witnessed in the garden of Versailles. Modern bemusement at royal privilege and contempt for social inequality come to the fore to resist the direction in which Burke is leading us. But unless we actually stop reading, he will not let us escape the conclusion of his analysis:

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly. Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way, gainers by it a sort of homicide much the more pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny. (66)

On the basis of “this barbarous philosophy,” Burke continued, “laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests” (66). The result of the “principles of this mechanic philosophy” would be the banishment of those “public affections, combined with manners” that “are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law” (66). Once those supplements were removed Burke was convinced that the same kind of untrammeled power that had destroyed them would attempt to govern without restraint.

In considering Burke’s passages on manners and morals, which have made so many people uncomfortable or angry, the reader must reach beyond the florid language to think carefully about the social presuppositions of an orderly society and a society whose order benefits not only its more
prosperous citizens but also its most humble. The reader must rise above the residual, lingering inner adolescent resentment against parental injunctions to behave well to recognize that good and decent behavior is part and parcel of peaceful life and mutually beneficial civil restraint. If manners and morals do not restrain, then human society will very much resemble Hobbes’s state of nature in which all are at war with all. Then the political response may be the Hobbesian sovereign that simply represses without reference to any restraints outside its own absolute authority.

Burke, whether the reader likes his rhetoric or not, had presciently outlined the exact character of the mode of political tyranny that from his own day to the present could be unleashed by stripping individual human beings of all their social characteristics and reducing them to some abstract enemy of the state or society or to something less than human. He also, however, understood that manners and morals not only keep the lower orders in subservience to their social superiors but no less certainly protect the poor and humble against each other. He would not have been surprised at the resurgence of local village violence against Jewish neighbors in parts of Eastern Europe during World War II when all of the restraint of custom and daily decencies dissolved. Burke understood that the ideology of the natural rights of man could protect no one from either the state or their neighbors without the supplementary restraint of manners and morals and, he would no doubt also have added, of religion.

The value of Burke’s analysis, to repeat, does not really lie in what many from the 1790s onward have regarded as its prophetic insights into the eventual judicial murder of the French royal family, further terror against French citizens from all social classes, the drive toward dechristianization, and the rise of a military dictatorship. The lasting command of Burke’s polemic is his recognition that the appeal to visionary political goals in the name of the rights of man or another political or religious ideology must necessarily result not in justice but in destruction and death, because rational utopians under the banner of light and reason would define and redefine political terms and social categories to advance their own tyrannical aims. It is exactly that essentially unrestrained power to proclaim law and to define its interpretation that Hobbes assigned to his sovereign and that Burke saw at work in the France of his own day. Burke believed that revolutionary governments would exercise that authority either in the name of idealistic abstract rights or in the name of abstract rights concealing selfish ends. The present would be sacrificed for an imagined future. While composing the Reflections, Burke told a correspondent, “I confess . . . that I have no great opinion of that sublime abstract, metaphysic revisionary, contingent human-
ity, which in cold blood can subject the present time, and those whom we daily see and converse with, to immediate calamities in favour of the future and uncertain benefit of persons who only exist in idea.”

In France, as is often ignored or forgotten, that drive toward political abstraction through the eradication of longstanding manners and morals, religion, tradition, and law led not only to the execution of the monarch and others in his family but to the deaths of thousands of peasants, who actually constituted the single largest group killed during the reign of terror. And such death coming to ordinary people in the name of utopian goals would continue to be the case throughout European history — from Burke’s day through the opening of the twenty-first century as the empire of light and reason embodied in fascist, communist, or radically nationalist regimes stripped ordinary individual human beings of any personal characteristics that would inhibit governments from destroying them. This deadly utopian phenomenon has, of course, not been limited to the European experience nor only to secular political ideologies. Whereas through most of the twentieth century political ideologies were often described as secular religion, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed the resurgence of religious ideologies functioning as political forces and displacing secular governments. Burke would not have been surprised.

This issue leads back to Richard Price’s sermon enunciating a particular interpretation of the English Revolution of 1688, an argument that Burke repudiates at length in the Reflections. Both men agreed that 1688 and the constitutional changes emanating therefrom had been a good thing. But Burke was determined that 1688 be understood as a complex historical event carried out by hesitant political actors and not as an event either justified by or justifying a set of disruptive instrumental ideas. Price had claimed that the Revolution of 1688 established the right of the English to choose their kings and cashier them for misbehavior. He thus appealed to a universalistic principle of political action that could presumably be applied at any time and any place. Burke explored in some detail what actually occurred in 1688 and emphasized how modest by his lights were the departures from previous practice. For Burke the cashiering of kings was the exception to the rule and something that might occur only in the rarest instance, and this from a man who had spent so much of his political career disparaging George III. Burke understood political ideas and ideals as explaining why and how political structures exist and function as they do, not as serving to spur immediate or future action. He knew that 1688 had involved a good deal more disruption than he admitted, but he downplayed all of that confusion because he was determined that a radical interpretation
of 1688 not be made a prescriptive model for his own day. The Revolution of 1688 was an episode that constituted a can of worms that he was determined should remain unopened, or an event that should be understood in the most conservative possible fashion.

The difference between Burke and Price did not, however, arise simply over interpreting the Revolution of 1688 and deciding what lessons it held for the present. The real difference was that Burke actually took Price’s ideas very seriously, whereas Price may not have. For more than two decades Price and other English political radicals had made extravagant radical political statements and claims without seeing Parliament reformed, the electoral system changed, or religious disabilities removed. Thus, as much as they sincerely believed what they said, they actually had not seen their ideas, which had become increasingly radical, accomplish much. Talk among English politically radical Dissenters had become cheap. Burke realized that with the example of revolution in France suddenly before the English public, talk could no longer be cheap. A new climate of opinion suddenly had emerged in which the idle political chatter of an earlier day could become a call to destructive action. Burke recognized that what was transpiring in France had transformed the politics of Europe for the foreseeable future.

Like William Butler Yeats meditating on the Easter 1916 uprising in Dublin, Burke saw that the French turmoil meant things political had “changed, Changed utterly.” Events in France had given Price’s reformist rhetoric an import that it had not possessed even a few months earlier. France by the middle of 1790 provided what had not existed in Europe since the English Civil War—a demonstration case of the effective toppling of a monarchy, ancient legislative body, and national church, and their reconstruction on radical ideological models. Not all the actors in France had changed—Louis XVI was still king—but the political principles and institutional settings informing and determining the behavior of the actors had been transformed. Burke grasped that the coming to the fore of the rights of man and popular sovereignty with no permanently constituted authority to define or circumscribe either was the crucial element. That ideology could, and in 1791 he predicted would, skip across borders, causing political and social tumult as nothing since the explosive ideas of the Protestant Reformation. Price’s sermon delivered in this new context was not one more demand for reform in England. In Burke’s mind it sounded a clarion call to a revolution. The universalistic principles enunciated by Price too closely resembled those driving action in France for Burke to ignore them or to let them escape rigorous condemnation.
Burke’s is the politics of the thinking, skeptical liberal prepared to recognize complexity as inherent in political life. Like the thought of all fundamentally liberal writers, Burke’s is meaningless and impotent if his admirers and opponents are unwilling to engage him. In a world of political actors who in the face of unprecedented events continue to react on the basis of unexamined ideas and the repetition of hackneyed political cant rather than really coming to grips with problems, Burke can appear only as a voice throwing up chimerical roadblocks. Burke could not and did not halt those whom Jacob Burkhardt would later term the “terrible simplifiers.” But for those who believe things political and things social are anything but simple, and the preservation of political liberty and decent civil behavior in any age never certain, Burke invites a profound discussion of how fundamentally if imperfectly free societies can preserve freedom and prudentially extend its circle, maintain internal civility, and protect themselves from external enemies. Burke would ask political actors to think deeply so that they may act wisely. In the wake of more than two centuries of destructive political utopianism and now religious fundamentalism around the globe, Burke’s may prove a welcome though difficult invitation. It has, however, often proved to be an invitation all too resistible to those determined to answer the siren calls of ideologies that promise a new age only at the cost of the destruction of both the past and the present, and to those so hopelessly enmeshed in the conceptual categories of the past that they cannot recognize new defining political moments.

Yet Burke’s remains an incomplete vision of politics. There are issues that he sweeps aside with his bold polemical brush as unworthy of attention or as fully decided when he in fact knew they were not settled. The most significant of these is the issue of equality in a politically liberal society. A full examination of Burke’s views on equality is not possible here. They are complicated and perhaps not wholly consistent.

In the Reflections Burke deplored what he sees as the equality that may emerge from a tyrannical state in which all citizens or subjects stand equally imperiled by a powerful sovereign, in this case the French National Assembly, unrestrained by law, custom, manners, morals, or religion. He again and again predicted that the revolution would culminate in a military despotism. But in the process of deploring this drive for equality associated with tyranny, Burke condemned virtually all other efforts to establish social and political equality as also necessarily leading to the tyrannical conclusion. For example, at one point he announced, “Believe me, Sir, those who attempt to level, never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers,
therefore only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground” (42). He denounced such efforts as “an usurpation on the prerogatives of nature” (42).

But Burke also insisted that he did not want “to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles” (43). He saw “virtue and wisdom” as the fundamental qualification for government, but he added that if access to a role in government “be opened through virtue, let it be remembered, too, that virtue is never tried but by some difficulty and some struggle” (43). For Burke, the best indication of success in that difficulty and struggle was the accumulation of significant property. He believed that the hereditary property and position of the aristocracy provided the “ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth” and that “some decent, regulated pre-eminence, some preference (not exclusive appropriation) given to birth is neither unnatural, nor unjust, nor impolitic” (44). Burke also very bluntly asserted that in the partnership which constitutes civil society “all men have equal rights; but not to equal things” (50).

These assertions jar the present-day reader as fundamentally unfair and deeply illiberal. They ignore the various kinds of inequality of opportunity or inequality arising from social position, racial background, or gender that account for so much inequality of property. By the standards of the twenty-first century Burke’s sentiments in regard to equality are indeed illiberal. But by the standards of the eighteenth century Burke’s opinions differed little from the view of unequal distribution and inheritance of property enunciated in John Locke’s Second Treatise of Civil Government and repeated by countless later authors. There Locke articulated a series of arguments that vigorously defended inequality of property as arising initially from different gifts of rationality and industriousness among human beings and then being sustained by a common assent to the inheritance of those resulting unequal quantities of property. Burke repeats in broad outline Locke’s presuppositions about the inheritance of unequal distributions of property, as he does Locke’s views that the purpose of government is the preservation of property. Burke and Locke may differ in their premises, but not sharply in their conclusions, with both arguing in defense of a status quo of unequal property arrangements. Furthermore, it should be noted that the political order that emerged in revolutionary France was no less dedicated to the preservation of unequal property than was Burke.

The liberal tradition of political thought would really begin to come to grips with the problem of inequality only well into the nineteenth century, and then, as to this day, imperfectly. Interestingly, one of the major
voices seeking to reconcile conservatives of Burkean temperament to both a greater acceptance of equality and of democracy was Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the great students of Burke. In *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) Tocqueville would appeal to a Burkean sense of the role of God in history and of religion in society to argue that the expansion of equality was a providential fact of world history and one not to be denied. He would also contend that the dangers that Burke and others after him associated with democracy could be tempered by religion, which the American experience demonstrated might flourish in a democracy. In that respect, two generations after his own death Burke furnished later liberal thinkers tools with which they began, however slowly, to accommodate a newly articulated body of liberal thought to the ideals of equality and popular sovereignty that in the turmoil of the 1790s Burke himself could not imagine as other than destructive.

Notes


2. Shortly after organizing itself, the National Assembly changed its name to the National Constituent Assembly. Burke, however, consistently uses the first term, and throughout this introduction I follow his practice.

3. These have been brilliantly probed by Rogers M. Smith in *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).


13. In this respect Burke’s argument was historically double-edged. He argued that the Enlightenment had been a fundamental cause of the French Revolution. He also rendered a particular historical interpretation of the Enlightenment itself, primarily equating it with rationalism. During the second half of the twentieth century, historians challenged and refined both of Burke’s profoundly influential assertions.


18. Ibid., 135.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 141.

22. Edmund Burke to Claude-François de Rivarol, June 1, 1791, in Selected Letters of Edmund Burke, 292.
23. Edmund Burke to Joseph Hartford, September 27, 1780, in Selected Letters of Edmund Burke, 247. This entire letter is quite informative, as are Mansfield’s comments on pp. 241–42.
26. Ibid., 330.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 304. Burke had by this point retreated from his comment of the summer of 1789 that the French might require a “Strong hand like that of their former masters to coerce them.” See note 8 above.
30. Philip Francis to Edmund Burke, February 19, 1790, in Selected Letters of Edmund Burke, 270.
31. Edmund Burke to Philip Francis, February 20/21, 1790, in Selected Letters of Edmund Burke, 273.
37. Edmund Burke to Adrein-Jean-François Duport, post March 29, 1790, in Selected Letters of Edmund Burke, 284 (emphasis in original).