

## The 'moronizing' of modern culture

Written by Ilana Mercer

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Still on the topic of the remarkable ["Edmund Burke,"](#) my conversation with Dennis O'Keeffe continues this week. O'Keeffe is Professor of Sociology at the University of Buckingham, and Senior Research Fellow at the [Institute of Economic Affairs,](#) "the UK's original free-market think-tank, founded in 1955." (Part I is ["Thomas Paine: 18th Century Che Guevara."](#))

Ilana Mercer: Russell Kirk, the father of American conservatism, wrote this about Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France": It "burns with all the wrath and anguish of a prophet who saw the traditions of Christendom and the fabric of civil society dissolving before his eyes." You express these exact sentiments, as eloquently, in your gem of a book, ["Edmund Burke."](#) Explain this passion of yours.

Professor O'Keeffe: Burke knew that occasionally there are to be found individuals of profound wickedness, in families, schools, workplaces. Their cause is often fed by wise fools, like Rousseau, and blind haters of reality, like Marx. Burke hated the murderous impulses of revolutionary France, which had trampled on the hard-won sanity of experience. Like most of us, I have known men and women of transparently despotic tendencies, kept in place only by the decency of most arrangements in the English-speaking world. In "Reflections" Burke is arguing that theories of governance which have overridden all the civilizing constraints built up over centuries are an appalling threat to decency and sanity. It is not clear which is worse in its effects: the substitution of a vile hierarchy for a fairly decent one, which happened in Germany after 1933; or the fantasy which holds that all hierarchy can be transcended, which was the one inspiring the revolutions of 1917 type. It is a sobering thought that many of the leaders of the political correctness persuasion, now, thank heavens, waning both in America and Britain, would surely have murdered their opponents if they could.

Ilana Mercer: "Burke opposed all schemes of fundamentalist reconstruction and the formulation of policy on the basis of purely abstract reasoning" and "loose speculation." For that reason, Burke opposed the French Revolution. Indeed, I deduced from this premise you've enunciated that Burke would have denounced America's contemporary Jacobins, the neoconservatives, in their efforts to transform the world, based on ignorant abstractions. In other words, a modern-day extrapolation of this would be the exportation of democracy (via [Daisy Cutters](#)) to Planets Iraq and Afghanistan. Where am I wrong?

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Professor O'Keeffe: You are quite right that Burke would not have approved of the neocons. Had he been born in the mid-nineteenth century or later, he might well have concluded that private enterprise plus a liberal politics is the best arrangement to which human beings can aspire. This does not constitute the capitalist economy and the universal franchise as a terminus for human affairs. If history has a terminus, we do not know what it is. Nor should we think we have the right to impose our markets plus franchise version on others, by any means, of war or otherwise. On the other hand it is not at all obvious how the West should proceed in relation to [the undeniable Islamist threat.](#)

Ilana Mercer: In "[Edmund Burke](#)" (p. 134), incidentally, you suggest that India will overtake China, based on the strength of its democracy. Of that I am unsure. For one, democracy is not to be conflated with freedom, much less with economic freedom. I would not be surprised if China has much more of the latter than does India. Have you any second thoughts about this?

Professor O'Keeffe: In my book I make more of India's being a free society than of the argument that it is a democracy. If I had taken Paul Johnson's case any further, I would also have stressed India's evolutionary caution in her governance. India has been trying to transcend the horrors of the caste-system; most educated Indians now seem to repudiate this dreadful source of division. We can compare this with China's blanket refusal even to look at the horrors of the long Maoist years. I take it that India is at least trying to bequeath her grandchildren a morally improved society; China, Russia and Japan seem to have no interest in this kind of political hygiene. India is clearly more "Burkean" than China. Its capitalism is less state-managed too. 4.

Ilana Mercer: "The French Revolution did not generate only a new politics ... Along with the new politics there came a new concept of personhood, a self-caressing egotism ... a moral and aesthetic theory based upon sentiment" (p. 122). And relativism too (p. 146). In my experience, this malady affects conservatives and liberals alike in the US. Hierarchy, so essential to ordered liberty, is no longer. Lost is the distinction between men and women of character, and those without it; between adults and youth (the latter are usually elevated and worshiped by ever-errant adults); between experience and a lack of it; between quality in intellectual and cultural products, and its absence. Faction has replaced the fellow-feeling that ought to accompany a shared purpose. Talk to me about what you've dubbed the Zeitgeist's "moronizing dialectic."

Professor O'Keeffe: You are entirely right to emphasize the cult of self-love as one of the worst flaws of modernity in the free societies. You are right that experience, character and the imperative of hierarchy are denigrated or neglected. Modernity has spawned a cult of the self, of which Rousseau, especially, was a founding club-member. The cult is also strangely intertwined with intellectual and moral relativism, which serves to cover up the empty education most people receive. Burke would have identified the schooling our young people get, the moral relativism which they are taught, as our central problem. The relativism of school and college involves a moronizing dialectic between soulless instruction and the grubby people making vast fortunes from popular culture. The idea has taken hold that everything is a swindle, that all hierarchies are based on power and only power and that there is no such thing as excellence.

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