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THE FATE OF TWO REVOLUTIONARY PROPHECIES: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND WILLIAM BLAKE ON EDMUND BURKE

Resume

In my paper, I would like to investigate two forms of criticism directed towards one of the most famous texts of the “founding father” of conservatism, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The one is a critique by an adherent of radical enlightenment, the “proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft who sees the French “Ancien Regime” and the British system of government of the time both in a negative context and would like to replace them with strict political rationality and “pure reason”. The other critique, William Blake sees the French Revolution not as an act of political rationalism but as a spiritual renewal and interprets it not as a tabula rasa but as a return from an already too rationalist to a free and just state of existence. I investigate Wollstonecraft’s essay *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and Blake’s poem *The French Revolution*. In conclusion, I try to find the answer why the two aforementioned authors, (as the majority of Burke’s initial critics) lost their enthusiasm about the revolution, within the context of the Jacobin dictatorship and the birth of anti-revolutionary political conservatism defended and justified by Burke.

Keywords: political aesthetics, whig, French Revolution, rights of men, anti-rationalism, critique of the enlightenment

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the most important and radical political event of the 18th century was the French Revolution in 1789, later called “great” by its intellectual and emotional adherents, and condemned as one of the greatest disaster on mankind in the field of society and politics by its antagonists and adversaries. The French Revolution of 1789, though not without antecedents, can be regarded as a symbolic dividing line between what we might call “modern world” and what we could name as traditional civilization and culture.

French Revolution provoked the greatest public debate on political principles in Britain since the Civil War of 1640. The debate on the revolution focused on the fundamental questions of politics, religion, society and history. What is the basis of political legitimacy? Where do the limits of the state end? How do the state and the church relate to each other? What is the role of leadership in political life and what does it mean to subordinate? What are the basic rights and obligations of a citizen? What is the actual purpose of government and what is the most appropriate sphere of government authority?

The debate that ensued in the wake of the revolution was the first to formulate the meaning and main issues of political modernity, which were now in their full “armour” in front of the debating parties. In this regard perhaps no other text has provoked greater public debate in England than Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was a response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*. It was first published anonymously on November 29, 1790. Her aim was to defend the principles of the French Revolution against Burke’s attack, and her work was the first published answer to Burke. According to her view, Burke formulated his two categories of the beautiful and the sublime also as ideas of the political sphere, and Burke himself proves this because he himself emphasized the political aspects in the Enquiry. Commenting on one of the most famous scenes of Burke’s *Reflections*, the so-called “stripping of the Queen” Wollstonecraft argued that the “stripping” is the demolition of the “politics of beauty” (Burke’s phrase) or the “politics through aesthetic.” The “stripping” is also the symbolic stripping of the lies and hypocrisy of the aristocratic culture itself. “Aesthetics” becomes the very target of her attack:

politics, associated with “good taste”, conceals immanent anti-democratic motives because taste is not, as an *idea innata*, inherently present in everyone, “from the creation.” She rejected Burke’s “age of chivalry”, (a phrase which he attributed to the Ancien Régime), and she replaced it with a concept of the world order based on the principles of strict political rationality or “pure reason.”

Among the adherents of the French Revolution we can find not only “revolutionary rationalists” but also “mystics.” William Blake is perhaps the most famous among them and he is also treated as a “Founding Father” of Romanticism. William Blake experienced the outbreak of the French Revolution as a spiritual act. While the conservative critics of the French Revolution first of all, Edmund Burke, who saw the French Revolution as a complete break with the past, Blake interpreted it as a return to a tradition much older than the one Burke defends. His views separated him from both the religious and social order of his time, which he regarded as declining, but not from the perspective of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. This is precisely why Blake was confronted with the order of his own age, finding it not too backward, but too rationalist, one that is no longer permeated by the spirit and therefore in need of renewal.

However – considering both rationalists and spiritualists – if we try to see Burke’s critiques in historical context, the complete break with tradition and the elimination of “prejudices” could be problematic as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out (2013). Prejudice is an inevitable part of the process of thinking and understanding – the Enlightenment, for example, was precisely the prejudice against prejudice. An essential prerequisite for human existence is historicity, as Gadamer (suggests: The truly historical thinking must also think about its own historicity) (2013, 159). The recognition of this paradox could significantly alter the view of the enthusiasts of the revolution. The problem can be examined in a wider context of the historical facts and of the related political ideologies of the era of the French Revolution as well as in the light of modern European political history.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S ANSWER TO EDMUND BURKE'S "POLITICAL AESTHETICS"

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is the first profound critique of the revolutionary ideology and the "founding stone" of conservative political philosophy. As Novalis wrote in one of his fragments: "Burke has written a revolutionary book against the Revolution" (Novalis104, cited in Furniss 1988, 2).

Apart from Burke's, no other work, dealing directly with the events of the revolution was able to tackle the most important points of the period's thinking. Nearly a hundred books and pamphlets were written in response to Burke's anti-revolutionary attack. Burke's *Reflections* are not only a classic of British conservative thought, but also a dividing line in connection with the evaluation of the revolution, which had an impact for two centuries. The book is not a strictly precise, pre-designed work, but rather a pamphlet that did not come to be written in the wake of the writer's theoretical inclinations, but due to the dramatic circumstances. Perhaps from the letter-form of the work stems the subjective, passionate, and deliberately dismissive voice in connection with political rationalism, which stunned Burke's contemporaries.

In his *Reflections*, Burke (1790) emphasized few topics with such liveliness as the perfection of the British "mixed constitution". The concept of a "mixed constitution" in all likelihood a legacy of the political philosophy of antiquity combines Aristotelian / Platonic forms of government: monopoly (monarchy / tyranny), domination of the few (aristocracy / oligarchy) and domination of many (politeia / democracy). According to the ciceronian tradition of early modern state theory as "classical republicanism" which significantly influenced Burke's views, each of these forms of government has both positive and negative characteristics. An existing monarchy provides stability beyond rapidly changing momentary interests, but can easily degenerate into tyranny; the aristocracy takes care of the protection of the country and limits the one-person supremacy, but can turn into an oligarchy of petty kings; democracy provides the people a voice in governance, but by leaving it alone it can become anarchy and then tyranny. According to this approach, the aim of mixed government is to add the positive qualities of the forms of government described above, while the negative ones extinguish each other by limiting

each other.¹Of course there were several critics in Britain who tried to challenge Burke's views on society, politics, and the revolution.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1790) opened Burke's line of critics with the anonymous publication of the pamphlet: *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Above all, she accused Burke of sentimentalism. She accused him of trying to undermine political rationality by arousing an emotional impulse. Wollstonecraft was well aware that Burke's criticism was directed not only against the French revolutionaries and their English supporters but also against Enlightenment rationalism. Her aim was to defend the principles of the French Revolution against Burke's attack. As she writes, her goal with the pamphlet is "to shew you [Burke] to yourself, stripped of the gorgeous drapery in which you have enwrapped your tyrannic principles" (28).

As Wollstonecraft-scholar Mary Poovey (1984) suggests, the first reading of *Vindications*, which may indeed seem disorganized, actually reflects Burke's own work. As Burke did for his own, Wollstonecraft chose for her pamphlet a letter-form, and while Burke addressed his letter to François Depont, he addressed her letter to Burke himself (58).

According to Poovey, the benefit for Wollstonecraft of choosing form, metaphors, and style similar to Burke's own, had the use of turning Burke's own arguments against him. Wollstonecraft tried to find and show the weak points and contradictions in Burke's own theory and the *Vindication* is equally about language and style as it is about political theory. However, these are – at least, according to Wollstonecraft – inseparable from each other. As Mary Wollstonecraft writes in the beginning of her pamphlet: "it would be something like cowardice to fight with a man who had never exercised the weapons with which his opponent chose to combat, and it would be irksome to refute sentence after sentence in which the latent spirit of tyranny appeared (Wollstonecraft 1790, 8).

What is common in Wollstonecraft's critiques of Burke, (such as James Mackintosh, Thomas Payne) is the accusation of him (a formerly Whig politician who was in favour of the American

1 By the 18th century, the theory of 'balanced governance' was already so prevalent in Britain that the British saw in their own system the most perfect manifestation of it: the division of British society into three orders of king, nobility, and people; and their three legal incarnations in the Crown, House of Lords, and House of Commons seemed to be the perfect realization of the antique theory of antique *Politeia*.

War of Independence) of the “betrayal” of Enlightenment ideas and the denial of their political consequences and applications. They all agreed to reject Burke’s “age of chivalry,” (a phrase which he attributed to the *Ancien Régime*²), and they replaced it with a concept of world order based on the principles of strict political rationality, or “pure reason”. The “old order” as a social and political system in which taste played such a big part, and which Burke glorified as “mixed government”, was considered by the critiques as a “Gothic” society (as James Mackintosh) which above all was a system of injustice. The unique factor is that, Wollstonecraft was the first to draw a definite parallel between Burke’s political *Reflections* and his early writings in connection with aesthetics.³

According to Wollstonecraft’s view, Burke’s two aesthetical categories of the beautiful and the sublime are also ideas of political reality, and Burke himself proves this because he himself emphasized the aristocratic political aspects in the *Enquiry*. These ideas are to support a distinctly aristocratic view of the state and society.⁴ Commenting on one of the most famous scenes from Burke’s *Reflections*, the so-called “stripping of the Queen” (Furniss 1988). According to Wollstonecraft, “stripping” is the destruction of the “politics of beauty” (Burke’s phrase) or “politics through aesthetics”. The “stripping” is also the symbolic stripping of the lies and hypocrisy of the aristocratic culture itself. “Aesthetics” becomes the very target of her attack:

2 In one passage of his *Reflections*, Burke wrote in connection with Marie Antoinette: “I had thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone” (Burke 1790, 58).

3 Burke’s early work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* brought him into the literary, philosophical and political consciousness of the era

4 For Burke the aristocratic view of society is not just a matter of politics, but also a matter of “aristocratic” aesthetic behavior. The fundamental theme of young Burke’s aesthetic investigations is the juxtaposition of the concept pair of beautiful and the sublime as two defining elements of aesthetic judgment. In his *Enquiry*, which fits well into the early tradition of British empiricism (bearing the effects of Lockean epistemology), young Burke examines, through a kind of “mechanistic psychology” the effect of the stimuli of the outside world on the human mind. However, he has not only contrasted these two key concepts, but has also presented their differences in an antagonistic form. The pair of opposites is highly asymmetrical: Burke defines the sublime characterized by a certain kind of “masculinity” as “the strongest feeling the mind can be capable of,” whereas beauty that bears feminine marks are subordinate. To the sublime, he attributes strength, fear, and power (the power of princes as well as God, and the fear of “creatures” and “subjects” to them), height, and depth (i.e., various physical and spiritual extremes), fear, spiritual agitation, and, in a sense, the elemental shock associated with experiencing transcendence, the religious “*mysterium tremendum*.” In contrast, beauty is characterized by “smallness,” aspiration, “pleasant form,” harmony, and order (corresponding to the idea of ancient Greek *kalokagathia*). The political implications of this division are obvious.

politics, associated with “good taste”, has a burden of immanent anti-democratic motives because taste is not, as an *idea innata*, inherently present in everyone, “from the creation.”

While Burke associates, beauty with femininity, and weakness and majesty with power and masculinity, according to Wollstonecraft, these distinctions are explicitly harmful. This injuriousness can also be noticed in the manner in which Burke actually describes women’s “virtues” as weaknesses, thus giving women no real political rights at all, providing them with no opportunity to participate in the public sphere are condemning them for doing “nothing.” Therefore, according to Wollstonecraft, the women’s march on Versailles, which was by Burke very much despised and condemned, was not an unnatural, disgusting phenomenon, nor the participants are monsters. As Wollstonecraft states, gender is indifferent to reason. As Claudia L. Johnson (1995) mentions, Wollstonecraft successfully overwrites here “the rhetoric of beauty with the rhetoric of rationality”, and Burke seems to be the hysterical, feminine, illogical writer, while Wollstonecraft is masculine and rational (27).⁵

According to Wollstonecraft, the *manner* in which Burke describes the procession of the women of Paris and the queen’s escape demonstrates Burke’s dreariness and hypocrisy: this is easily inferred from the fact that Burke’s conduct during the madness of King George III was quite the opposite. The insensitivity and indifference of Burke’s speech during the period of madness clearly demonstrate this. This means, Burke try to arouse emotions in a “Machiavellian” way just to support his political ends. Wollstonecraft states: “Sensibility is the *manie* of the day, and compallion the virtue which is to cover a multitude of vices” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 7). She describes Burke as a superficial and hypocritical man, who attracts attention rather than objectivity. On the contrary, she characterises her own position as completely sincere: “I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments”– as she states in the beginning of her “letter.” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 6). Burke’s delicate sensibility overshadows reason’s impulses because: “It is not surprising, in this view, that

⁵ We have to point out, there is a small kind of paradox hidden in this argument, which could be turned against the author: but the original argument, as a matter of course, was not intended to show that women are usually irrational, but all the way around.

when you should argue you should become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, rather than enlightening your understanding” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 7).

In Wollstonecraft’s view, Burke is a defeated careerist politician who had already discredited himself in the debates on the *Regency Bill* when he voted to remove the king as soon as possible for his own financial purposes. When the Prince of Wales, who applied for the position of seniority, offered him a job as finance minister, Burke brought up statistics to prove that the king’s recovery was impossible. Burke, who claims “his heart is not made of stone”, himself tried to deprive his ruler of his rights, stating that “God had hurled him from his throne” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 21), while defending the right of inheritance against the nonconformist minister, Richard Price.

While she attacks the person of Burke, Wollstonecraft also confronts her own view of civil society with that of Burke, who, in her opinion, advocates the hotbed of decadence, hypocrisy, and prejudice. She linked the criticism of existing culture and the need for transfigured gender roles by contrasting the “natural” and the “artificial”. Courtesy, the discriminatory treatment of the French Queen, or any woman, is arbitrary, unreasonable, and unnatural.

Wollstonecraft’s critique examines the moral consequences of the British system of government rather than the parliamentary organization itself. The biggest problem, she argues, is that the system only protects the interests of owners, while it diminishes those at the lower stages of the social hierarchy:

„I cannot avoid expressing my surprise that when you recommended our form of government as a model, you did not caution the French against the arbitrary custom of pressing men for the sea service. You should have hinted to them, that property in England is much more secure than liberty, and not have concealed that the liberty of an honest mechanic – his all – is often sacrificed to secure the property of the rich. For it is a farce to pretend that a man fights for his country, his hearth, or his altars, when he has neither liberty nor property (Wollstonecraft 1790, 12).

She refers thus to Locke’s definition of private property (ownership comes from work) as opposed to the feudal inheritance law preferred by Burke. In her view, the principle of the law of inheritance, which remains an anachronistic remnant of feudalism, is one of the greatest obstacles to the development of European civilization, as one rhymed line of her pamphlet

against Burke clearly shows: “The Briton takes the place of the man, and the image of God is lost in the citizen!” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 12). According to her view, Britain’s main problems stems from the unequal distribution of property, and Burke welcomes a system of law that only concerns first-borns. While Burke thinks it is rightful to “sacrifice” the second and third born children to the firstborn in order to hold the family’s property and wealth together that is, in fact, the purest arrogance from Burke, since all benevolent people know that true parental love does not pick somebody out.

According to Wollstonecraft, another great problem with the English inheritance system is that, this system is the school of immorality among the British upper classes. Parental power is solely interested in increasing wealth, and while it prevents early marriages young people do not develop a sense of responsibility that defines the daily life of a head of family. The consequences are socially accepted promiscuity, sloth, and burnout. Individuals being in charge of society are thus virtually “useless” in constructive work, and the administration of justice is also likely to overlook the sins of the rich. Decadence stemming from a poor inheritance system radiates to the body of the entire state. Wollstonecraft opposes here the “vices of the rich” with the classical Republican conception of *virtue* of which she speak as the essence of being a citizen. Her views about virtue are closely connected with her family, and this fact also distinguishes her viewpoint from standpoint of other British Republicans of the era such as Hutcheson or Godwin (Jones 2002, 44–46.) As Virginia Sapiro (1992) states: for her, virtue begins with the home, private virtues are the foundations of the public virtues (126). Inspired by Rousseau, Wollstonecraft envisions an idyllic village family farm. In her view, the English parliamentary system is mainly based on corruption. As she states, “you must have seen the clogged wheels of corruption continually oiled by the sweat of the laborious poor, squeezed out of them by unceasing taxation (Wollstonecraft 1790, 16).

Any change to this English constitution, this *Regimen Mixtum* which was praised by Burke, would not really prove its strength, but its weakness. A “mixed constitution” is a structure incapable of self-correction, altering certain elements of it would result in the collapse of the whole structure: if the democratic elements were strengthened, the aristocratic character would be lost, but if the power of the upper house were to be increased, the

system would turn into a mere tyranny. According to her, unable to meet the challenge of changing times, the English system is not an example for any country,⁶ but a cascading edifice.

According to her view, if the French really wanted to apply the English system in their own country, as Burke suggested, they would have had to make sure that the English constitution was not only the best modern, but also the best possible, and that kind of freedom could be based on it, for which the masses yearn. According to Wollstonecraft, this is apparently not the case in England.

In the House of Commons, all the prerogatives can be found that could be taken into terms of rank, origin, and authority, but if we were to look for them in the field of intelligence, we would have to be disappointed. In addition to this, the House of Commons has no real decision-making power, and Members can only decide on the way in which the directives of House of Lords directives are to be implemented, rather than on the laws themselves. But even assuming that the House of Commons has real talents, they would not have come close to real power, since the members of the House of Lords are largely stem from hereditary aristocracy. Those who did not have to fight for their jobs would in all likelihood be unable to innovate – the English system is corrupt and unfair, dominated by a system of prerogatives left by feudalism instead of reason (Wollstonecraft 1790, 31–33).

As we can see, not just the language of the protestant-dissident tradition manifests itself not only in these lines of her often the logical language, but also in her preferred values: she emphasizes the values of hard work, self-education, simplicity, and morality against the sins and hypocrisy of the rich. According to her, people have rights because they are just and reasonable, not because they inherited rights. While Burke argues that civil society and government must trust tradition, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that a “social contract” is always the result of rational agreement. In her view, precedent is not a reason to adopt a law or a constitution.

According to her view, even the most “progressivist” form of Protestantism is connected to a form of socio-political structure what is far from satisfying the needs of a truly enlightened

⁶ In his *Reflections* Burke recommended to the French a similar system of government to the British one as the most distinguished system of monarchy, aristocracy and two houses of parliament.

thinker. “A Protestant must acknowledge that this faint dawn of liberty only made the subsiding darkness more visible; and that the boasted virtues of that century all bear the stamp of stupid pride and headstrong barbarism” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 10). “Are these the venerable pillars of our constitution?” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 9)– ask the writer a question, which is both disturbing and provocative to the contemporary British audience be this atheist or protestant.

Wollstonecraft was well aware that Burke’s criticism was directed not only against the French revolutionaries and their English followers but also against enlightened rationalism. According to Wollstonecraft, with the spread of the ideas of the enlightenment as they “stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 15)– the consequences of our actions will be foreseeable, so people will have no fear of rational action. Here we can see the nonconformist-radical ideal, according to which man sets the world in the image of God, that is the image of a rational man, who does not adapt themselves to the corrupt and chaotic world, but is capable of “recreating” the world for their own God given reason. Men already possesses freedom by God’s creation in His own image. The need for human freedom is derived from God Himself –the “eternal foundation of right” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 8) and who would dare to deny that freedom is an attribute of the Creator?

Like Thomas Paine and most of the devotees of radical enlightenment, she sees the “ancestral world” of the medieval Anglo-Saxon legal system as an extremely dark, negative one.⁷ This world from which, as Burke said, the current English system of government was born, was administered by people driven by prejudices and superstitions. Her irony on Burke’s enthusiasm for antiquities on his frequent references to historical precedents is apparent.

As she states:

”It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 11).

7 Using Burke’s own reference to architecture, she asks, “why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials?” (Wollstonecraft 1790, 31).

THE EVALUATION OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION BY WILLIAM BLAKE

Among the adherents of the French Revolution, we can find not only “revolutionary rationalists” but also “mystics.” William Blake is perhaps the most famous among them and he is also treated as a “Founding Father” of Romanticism. Blake – who worked perhaps in every branch of art: he was poet, a painter and an engraver and composer – approached the world of politics, and thus the revolution, in a peculiar aesthetic sense, with an “aesthetical mysticism.” For him, aesthetics are closely and inseparably connected with religion; it can be said that the meaning of the two is grounded in each other. Blake’s philosophical views were influenced by Christian mysticism, first of all by a protestant mystic, Jacob Böhme, the Jewish Kabbalah, and partly by neo-Platonism. He was a committed Christian who was hostile to the Church of England (indeed, to almost all forms of organized religion). His views separated him from both the religious and social order of his time, which he regarded as declining, but not from the perspective of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. This is precisely why Blake was confronted with the order of his own age, finding it not too backward, but too rationalist, one that was no longer permeated by the spirit and therefore in need of renewal.

According to Blake, imagination is the instance among human abilities that most closely resembles God. It is our only ability that is free in all respects, and this overriding freedom reflects man’s original nature, his substance not affected by “original sin”. Nothing can limit the imagination, since the essence of being is revealed in it. Christ is the embodiment of imagination, and since imagination is clearly the most active in the artist, Christ alone can rise in him.

William Blake experienced the outbreak of the French Revolution as a spiritual act. While the “proto-conservative” critics of the French Revolution thus, Edmund Burke, saw the revolution as a complete break with the past, Blake interpreted it as a return to a tradition much more ancient than Burke defends. Under the influence of Paine and Rousseau, Blake also believed that the revolution would restore man to its original, unspoiled state when, as Thomas Paine said: “before class and birth divided human society, man was his high and only rank.” According

to the interpretation of William Richey (1992), Blake used the revolution as an epical narrative that precedes the “ancient” chivalrous and aristocratic traditions to which Burke refers as “ancient” (817–819). According to Blake, the revolution is therefore given the style of an ancient epic, one that has not yet been corrupted by the “false refinements” of modern society.

With his poem, *The French Revolution* (1791) Blake wanted to argue with Edmund Burke, the main “conservative” voice of his age.⁸ Burke, with his *Reflections* in the same year diminished a great deal of the English sympathy for the revolution. The result was a poetic dialogue in which Blake questions the assumptions underlying Burke’s counter-revolutionary text.

Blake’s poem relies on the events of the revolution although, he includes characters that are his own. The poem deals with the symbolism of the Bastille, and the “grey towers” of the building represent the anachronism of a feudal system.

By writing in a way that imitates an epos, Blake was able to attack Burke on a second front, because being the most ancient form, the epic is also considered the most majestic. Already in connection with the critic of Burke’s aesthetical work, Blake explained he thinks Burke’s political philosophy is based on a faulty aesthetics.⁹ Burke argues that the sublime derives entirely from our fear of physical pain, and in the work, he systematically identifies the qualities that are most effective in illuminating such terrifying reactions: power, greatness, infinity, loneliness, and above all, obscurity.

While Burke described the revolution as a case of “false Sublime” Blake confronted this statement by subverting Burke’s own images: what Burke considered to be truly Sublime, Blake continually refuted, what Burke saw as a case of false Sublime, he treated as a model of true majesty. Blake dismissed Burkenian Sublime as nothing more than trickery that frightens the audience,

8 As István Rácz (2007) writes: “William Blake’s poem *The French Revolution* is probably the first British literary representation of the revolution in France. Blake wrote it in 1790 and 1791, that is, during the first phase of the revolution, without the benefit of any historical perspective” (39).

9 According to István Rácz (2007): “In French Revolution Blake achieves a sublime effect by transforming the historical events represented in the poem into a timeless condition, thus creating visions of “Minute Neatness of Execution”. He removes the revolution from its original historical context, its causes and consequences; to use Coleridge’s later phrase, this means removing the film of familiarity. In other words, he makes the historical event “apocalyptic” (42).

as he writes: “obscurity is not a source of majesty or anything else”. And in his eyes, the basis for Burke’s political argument was no longer solid. Just as the Sublime of Burke depended on obscurity, and to make the otherwise ineffective image effective, the ornaments and marble palaces of the *Ancient Régime* also served to give him a false appearance of *grandeur* and splendor. Blake used a two-step strategy to undermine Burke’s critique of the revolution. He first revealed the false Sublime of the *Ancien Régime* by presenting his decadent, and ultimately weak, and then contrasted all this with the true majesty of the revolutionary.

According to Blake-scholar, Hüseyin Alhas (2017) the *The Song of Los*, the last of the continental prophetic series, presents Blake’s perception of the impact of the wartime period and 1795 peace negotiations on English common people. The ambiguous atmosphere of the period related to the future of the French-British relations is reflected in the text. Blake gives specific references to the events of the period in England while also presenting the maliciousness of the kings and clergy towards the people in the spiritual history of humanity. The prophetic series is concluded in ambiguity since none of the revolutions of the era, according to Blake, achieved the change of the cycles. All the sources of fallacies, the oppressive states and the established Churches, continued their existence and even a “new destructive revolutionary monster” was born after the Terror Period (103).

Blake’s conclusion: that spiritual regeneration of humanity by political revolution became a false project. I quote from the *Song of Los* a poem from 1795
 “[...] Laws & Religions to the sons of Har binding them more
 And more to Earth: closing and restraining:
 Till a Philosophy of Five Senses was complete
 Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton & Locke

Clouds roll heavy upon the Alps round Rousseau & Voltaire:
 And on the mountains of Lebanon round the deceased Gods
 Of Asia; & on the deserts of Africa round the Fallen Angels
 The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent [...]

(J. Ellis 1906, 420–421.)

BURKE AND CRITIQUES: THE PROBLEM OF EGALITARIANISM, DEMOCRACY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

When we try to investigate the views of Burke's rationalist critics in history, we often find ourselves getting into contradictions. The optimism of these authors, their political doctrine based on abstract rationality, were hardly justified by the course of history. It is enough if we are thinking of the wars never seen before, of the 20th century, the cold war, the problems of mass migration and some very recent processes about the deepening gulf between the professional political class and the "people" in many democratic countries. Undoubtedly, one of the most important issues of the French Revolution was democracy, and while democracy is still the dominant paradigm of political theory today, for the spectator this may be the point where Burke's critics seem to have strong arguments. But, critics of democracy have warned us of its dangers since the time of Burke.

Regarding his critique of the idea of equality, Burke used first some characteristics of the later critical political-philosophical reflection, raised later by classical liberal authors as Benjamin Constant and Tocqueville from the point of view of freedom and de Maistre and de Bonald from the point of view of authority. Burke also influenced some "mass and elite" theorists of the XX. century as Ortega y Gasset and Gustave Le Bon. They also perceived that idea of unlimited "equality" is in close connection with philosophical and practical materialism. As Ortega y Gasset (1957) states in his *Revolt of the Masses* this pseudo-individualism can lead to manipulated collectivism the "mass civilization", which from the outside seems to be a progress but in its essence, manipulated by political and social demagoguery.¹⁰

Of the interpreters and critics of the French Revolution of 1789, Burke pointed out with the sharpest emphasis that behind the phenomenon of revolution the "growth of equality" can be grasped. A phenomenon which's nature is not yet known, but whose signs can be clearly seen in the movements of history. All this is recognizable in the "equalization of conditions of life" – an observation later articulated by de Tocqueville. In *The Old*

10 "The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated" (18).

Regime and the Revolution, Tocqueville (1856) also explained: what the revolution did not overthrow but perfected, is the activity called government guardianship meanwhile it seems increasingly doubtful that the phrase of “democracy” could lead to a greater freedom or could lead humanity to a “truer existence.” We can see these processes mirrored in the events of today’s world politics: the so-called “democratic” states have a lot of authoritarian features, they are increasingly built on hard power structures and propaganda, and “democratic” politicians try to protect the people from more and more possible menaces with growing amount of regulations and restrictions.

Regarding the non-rationalist critiques and the “spiritual” ideas of Blake: it’s seemed like the logic of modernity is not in favor of a “spiritual renewal”, instead, this is about the complete loss of religious or spiritual foundation of humanity and the benefit of the prevailing technocratic rationality associated with “Big Business”, “crony capitalism” and now unlimited technological power structures. Following the main features of modern history, and regarding the time and the historical distance from the era of the French Revolution, the focus is more and more on the material side of existence. The idea that, leaving the triad of consumption-convenience-entertainment, humanity would “return” or “evolve” to a more spiritual stage while the people take on a conscious reversal of the direction of the menacing processes of modern economy, “idea of unlimited progress” intertwined with the ever-present materialistic approach, also contradicts the logic and reality of late modernity. It’s seemed though, Blake was also aware of these tendencies regarding his later corrections of his own ideas about the French Revolution.

Burke could foresee these processes earlier, more clearly and more precisely than the enthusiasts of the French Revolution. He understood that the “revolutionary spectacle” is intimately tied to the myth of popular sovereignty. He understood that this myth is the opportunity for possible demagogues. They can rise and probably will rise in accordance with the emerging “power” of the masses. He understood the monumental dangers and possibilities for double-dealing, which could be based on a rising democracy. No doubt, there is a lot of witty and plausible observations on the faults of Britain’s political system or the politics of hereditary aristocracy at the end of the late 18th century Britain by Wollstonecraft or Blake. Although, Burke is the one

who was able to conceive that, as Plato and Aristotle have already argued in the past, there is no such thing as clear “self-government” and the people never rule themselves but through people who act as “democrats”. Jacobin terrorists and warmongers also acted like “democrats” and so many harmful politicians with opaque background called themselves by this name. This is why Burke considered that a deeply rooted and loyal natural aristocracy is a prerequisite for the constitution of the social body, because “a great mass of people” can only be formed in a shape by authority and outstanding persons, whom people look up to as their natural leaders. As Burke (1791) writes in his *Appeal*:

“For this reason, no legislator, at any period of the world, has willingly placed the feat of active power in the hands of the multitude: Because there it admits of no control, no regulation, no steady direction whatsoever. The people are the natural control on authority; but to exercise and to control together is contradictory and impossible. As the exorbitant exercise of power cannot, under popular sway, be effectually restrained, the other great object of political arrangement, the means of abating an effective desire of it, is in such a state still worse provided for. The democratic commonwealth is the foodful nurse of ambition” (120).

In other words, according to him, it is possible that in some individuals the true excellence could be recognized without the conception of popular sovereignty or the process of voting and this recognition still does not diminish the excellence and autonomy of those who recognized it, but rather multiplies by “proud submission”, “dignified obedience” and “generous loyalty” (quoted from Burke in Kramick 1992, 17). Parties or some form of vote can also be a part of the “mixed government” but they are subordinated to a living and existing monarchy, which is not powerless as today’s representational monarchs.

Regarding monarchy, in connection with the British system of rule, Burke wrote:

“We are members in a great and ancient MONARCHY; and we must preserve religiously the true legal rights of the sovereign, which form the key-stone that binds together the noble and well-constructed arch of our empire and our constitution” (36).

In Burke’s defence of monarchy, we can clearly see the notion and idea of the so-called “Great Chain of being”,¹¹ Burke sees the

¹¹ According to the idea of the chain, the socio-political system does not live an independent life, but is only one of the planes of the cosmic order of nature. The Great Chain of Being runs

source and legitimacy in the sovereign monarch, not merely as a human personality but as a spiritual dignity represented by and embodied in the king's personality. The principle of monarchy is in clear contradiction with the notion of popular sovereignty, – as he could see in the events of the French Revolution the people are not “free” and not “wise” but very easily manipulated by the demagogues, therefore they are not to be identified a sovereign.

According to Kuehnelt-Leddihn (1974), an important critique of revolutionary democracy in the 20th century, the French Revolution took the term “democracy” in its literal meaning. Regarding his interpretation, the term means the *kratos* (power) of the *demos*, which means primarily that the origin of power is from the people and the people can govern themselves through this. (27). He starts thought, his main work, *Liberty or Equality - The Challenge of our Time* with the following line of thought:

”Each triumph for “democracy” has ended, on the Continent, with a frightening set-back for the cause of liberty. The years 1917, 1918, 1922, 1933, 1938 were a chain of defeats for the cause of freedom” (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1954). Similar findings can be found during the twentieth century can be found in the works of Ortega y Gasset, Jacob Talmon, Oswald Spengler, Leo Strauss or Eric Voegelin.

The 1792's acme of the revolutionary terror, the period of “Great Fear” invoked a lot of fear and scepticism among former supporters of the French Revolution. The darkening of their worldview begins with the reign of the Jacobins. Earlier this year, many revolutionaries, such as Novalis or Friedrich Schlegel in Germany, or Wordsworth in England, became more and more skeptical about the events from this year on, and very few maintained their original position. Mary Wollstonecraft's views were also altered by the biting of revolutionary terror. By the second half of the 1790s, she had already considered that in France the aristocracy was replaced by plutocracy, and in his later work (*The French Revolution*), almost “Burkenian” fears from political chaos and mob rule emerged. While one group talked about the tragic barbarization of what was originally a

from God to inanimate objects, Man who is the only actor of physical reality in which the soul dwells, standing on the boundary of the spiritual (inscrutable) and the material (perceptible) existence. Man combines the qualities of the heavenly and earthly hierarchies (See Arthur Lovejoy: *The Great Chain of Being*).

good cause, or the “unintended consequences”, the other group (with the name of William Blake among them) fundamentally re-evaluated its views on the revolution.

Burke – not as his radical critiques – was deeply sceptical about an optimistic evaluation of human nature and in this point, he seemed again to be more realistic than his adversaries even though the radicals also had some plausible observations about the actual reality of Burke’s “mixed constitution” or the unfairness of the system of inheritance. To what extent Burke’s pessimism can be traced back to his particular psychological constitution, conceptions of the essence of human being, theological beliefs or empirical experience is hard to judge. It is a fact though, that he was deeply affected by situations – first and the foremost political situations regarding the events of the French Revolution – which can be associated with cowardice, spiritual weakness, disloyalty and dishonesty. Burke never considered himself a conservative, but called himself an “old Whig”, someone who try to defend socio-political structures, which are – according to him – favourable to reasonable freedom, while knows that true freedom is never in contradiction with loyalty, hierarchy and aristocratic thought and behaviour. We can speak though validly about conservatism regarding Burke and radicalism in accordance with his enemies: Burke was preserver of the old European tradition of limited freedom, while radicals wanted to root out structures: while the intentions of Wollstonecraft or Burkewere clearly not malevolent or intentionally destructive, we have to observe with Richard M. Weaver: “Ideas have consequences.”

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СУДБИНА ДВА РЕВОЛУЦИОНАРНА ПРОРОЧАНСТВА: МЕРИ ВОЛСТОНКРАФТ И ВИЛИЈАМА БЛЕЈКА О ЕДМУНДУ БУРКУ*

У свом раду желео бих да истражим два облика критике усмерене ка једном од најпознатијих текстова „оца оснивача” конзервативизма, Размишљања о револуцији у Француској Едмунда Бурка. Један је критика присталице радикалног просветитељства, „протофеминисткиње Мери Вулстонкрафт која француски „Анциен Региме” и британски систем власти тог времена види у негативном контексту и желела би да их замени строгим политичким рационалност и „чисти разум”. Друга критика, Вилијам Блејк, не види Француску револуцију као акт политичког рационализма, већ као духовну обнову и тумачи је не као табула раса, већ као повратак из већ превише рационалистичког у слободно и праведно стање постојања. Истражујем Вулстонкрафтов есеј Заштита права мушкараца и Блејкову песму Француска револуција. У закључку, покушавам да пронађем одговор зашто су двојица поменутих аутора, (као већина Буркових почетних критичара) изгубили ентузијазам за револуцију, у контексту јакобинске диктатуре и рађања антиреволуционарног политичког конзервативизма који је бранио и оправдавао би Бурке.

Кључне речи: политичка естетика, виг, Француска револуција, људска права, антирационализам, критика просветитељства

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