Edmund Burke, Empire, and Conservative Foreign Policy in the United States

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Abstract: What would the father of conservatism, Edmund Burke, make of the foreign policy of the postwar United States? In recent years, Burke has emerged as an unlikely ally for critics of empire and colonialism in the history of political thought. Meanwhile, other scholars have examined how Burke has been canonized by conservatives in the United States during the postwar era. Burke the critic of colonialism, however, has remained distant from Burke the postwar conservative icon. The different versions of Burke are overdue for an introduction. In this paper, I consider how Burke as a critic of British colonialism would interact with and diverge from Burke as interpreted by three factions of American conservatives with three competing visions of the proper role of the United States in the world.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, history of political thought, conservatism, empire, United States foreign policy, international relations, American conservatism, colonialism

Introduction: American Burkeanism and Foreign Policy?

In 2012, at the 30th Anniversary Gala of the conservative magazine *The New Criterion,* Henry Kissinger, 89, was bestowed the first Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society, given to a figure whom the editors of the magazine believed to "have made conspicuous contributions to the defense of civilization." In his acceptance speech, "The limits to universalism," Kissinger addressed his role in the foreign policy of the United States (Kissinger 2012). While power and values had been commonly depicted as two incommensurable guides for theories of international order, Kissinger said that he aspired to position himself between two extremes. Kissinger argued that an extreme version of realism, a view sometimes attributed—wrongly, he argued—to him, would envision an international order of equilibrium punctuated by violent conflict, with no possibility of change. To Kissinger, however, the hawkish foreign policy of the so-called "neoconservatives," who aspired to spread the values of the United States across the world, was no better, substituting a "democratic teleology of history" and assigning America "the responsibility (and the ability) to urge it along through diplomacy, the encouragement of revolution, and, in the extreme, through force" (Kissinger 2012). Kissinger had a name for the ethos that would transcend this cleavage: "American Burkeanism" (Kissinger 2012).

What might American Burkeanism be? Kissinger was not the first to propose Burke as an answer to foreign policy questions in the United States, nor was he the last. Burke has been appropriated, referenced, and canonized by generations of Americans, most of whom, particularly since the Second World War, have identified as conservative. The history of the legacy of Burke in the United States has been documented, notably by Drew Maciag in his book *Edmund Burke in America* (2013), which details early American engagements with Burke during the Revolutionary Era, appropriations of Burke by both Democrats such as Woodrow Wilson and Republicans such as Theodore Roosevelt during the Progressive Era, and the resuscitation of Burke as the father of

conservatism during the postwar period.[1] In recent years, American scholars have continued to create different Burkean traditions in American political thought, applying a Burkean label to figures as varied as Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Peter Viereck (Robert 2016) or Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Abraham Lincoln (Weiner 2019).

Meanwhile, in the last quarter century, scholarship in the history of political thought, beginning with Uday Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire* (1999), has presented a competing interpretation of Burke, emphasizing his criticism of the British colonial project in India and refashioning him as a critic of both liberalism and empire. While Mehta criticizes the tendency of liberalism to impute European social structures and characteristics as universal and desirable, and to justify imperial domination by doing so, he contrasts such insidious assumptions with Burke and his grasp of the moral perils of empire, in his crusade to impeach Warren Hastings, the corrupt Governor-General of Bengal, and elsewhere. Mehta also praises Burke's "ability to view the unfamiliar from a perspective that does not a priori presume its provisionality" (Mehta 1999, 214). As Mehta has continued to develop his line of argument (Mehta 2012), other scholars have incorporated a critical Burke into their work on the history of political thought and imperialism (Muthu 1999; Pitts 2005; Muthu 2009; Pitts 2018). As scholars traced connections between the history of empire and colonialism and the foundations of liberal political thought—from John Locke's role in the framing of the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina to John Stuart Mill's career in the East India Company—Burke emerged as a provocative dissenting voice. [2]

Studies of Burke's international thought in the eighteenth-century imperial context and studies of Burke as he has been inherited in the twentieth-century American context, however, have largely remained separate. Burke the international thinker and critic of British empire has remained

[1] For a popular review of Maciag's book in *The New Yorker,* see Gopnik 2013. For a chapter that details the history of the dispute over Burke as a conservative icon among conservatives since the early postwar era, see Deane 2012.
[2] See Marwah et al. 2020 for a set of arguments reckoning with the turn to empire in political thought.

distant from Burke the postwar American conservative icon. The different Burkes are overdue for an introduction. How does Burke, the eighteenth-century critic of British empire, overlap with or diverge from Burke as he has been appropriated by American conservatives? How does Burke's international thought—from his criticisms of the British imperial project in India to his later insistence on intervention to prevent the international spread of democracy and Jacobinism after the revolution in France—map onto conservative arguments about the proper role of the United States in the world?

In what follows, I will consider the divergences and convergences between Burke's international political vision and three factions of conservatives, defined by their conflicting stances on Burkeanism and the foreign policy of the United States. I argue that American conservatives seeking to use Burke as a guide in the arena of foreign policy have neglected the full extent of Burke's critique of empire and liberal universalism. Building on the interpretation of Burke as a theorist of the international order developed by Mehta (1999) and Jennifer Pitts (2018), I intend to adumbrate a different American Burkeanism, one which envisions parts of the world outside of the United States as different without viewing them as provisional and ideally subject to a singular set of laws defined by the values and interests of the United States.

After reviewing the different approaches scholars have taken to Burke as a guide for international action, I proceed in three parts. First, I will examine Leo Strauss's critical interpretation of Burke, the foreign policy of the so-called "neoconservatives," some of whom were famously inspired by Strauss, and how their views contrast with those of Burke. I argue that Strauss and the neoconservatives interpreted Burke veraciously but antagonistically, presenting a foil to Burke by promoting violent intervention abroad with the intention of spreading American values. Second, I will discuss Russell Kirk, the conservative political theorist who drew extensively on Burke, and the later "paleoconservatives," who took inspiration from Kirk and split with the neoconservatives over

the issue of the role of the United States in the world. Although Kirk deployed Burke to oppose violent intervention abroad by the United States, I argue that the development of paleoconservatism reveals the limits of Kirk's interpretation of Burke, which relies on a Catholic notion of universal values. Third, I will consider the tradition of "realism," with a focus on one of its founding figures, the German scholar Hans Morgenthau. Although Morgenthau cited Burke frequently as a proponent of the balance of powers among European nations, I argue that Morgenthau's emphasis on Burke's work on the European community neglected Burke's thinking on that which lay outside of the European community and on the moral perils of conquest and domination. I conclude by returning to Kissinger. I argue that readings of Burke as a critic of empire indicate a different limit to universalism, which goes beyond what Kissinger outlined in his 2012 speech. By doing so, I hope to help reinvigorate the conversation about what Burke might have to offer contemporary dialogues about the constitution of the international order as the uniliteral international authority of the United States wanes.

Burke and International Thought

Burke is a significant yet confounding figure in the history of international thought. Burke's political career can be segmented into four periods, centered on four different political causes. The first was the project of restraining royal authority in Britain; the second, the American controversy and the American Revolution; the third, the debates about India and the trial of Hastings; and the fourth, the French Revolution and the consequent war. Three of the four are engaged in foreign policy issues. However, the disjuncture between Burke's support for the American Revolution and his opposition to the French Revolution, and his opposition to interference abroad in India but support for interference after the revolution in France, presents a puzzle for scholars attempting to interpret Burke as a normative theorist of international relations.

In this section, I survey two ways in which scholars have interpreted Burke as a guide for international action: first, the approach of Jennifer Welsh (1995) and David Armitage (2000), which seeks to explain Burke's apparently conflicting stance on foreign intervention through his idea of a European community united by common values; second, the approach of Mehta (1999), which focuses attention on Burke's work concerning India, thus emphasizing Burke's views on the limits of the European community. I will then introduce the synthesis of these two approaches made by Pitts (2018). In her synthesis, Pitts portrays Burke as a proponent of a European community subject to certain moral and legal restraints, but not assuming that others should also be subjected to the same restraints, nor grounding its action in absolute moral authority. It is this synthesis that I argue has been neglected in American conservative interpretations of Burke. And it is this synthesis that I believe could be of particular value for contemporary commentators who seek to use Burke as a guide for the future of the international order and the role of the United States in that order.

The first interpretation of Burke as a theorist of international relations focuses on Burke's conception of the European community. In *Edmund Burke and International Relations,* Jennifer Welsh (1995) divides Burke's theory of international relations into two distinct moments: in the first moment, Burke articulated how the international order should be arranged in "normal" times, through "constitutionalism," which would seek a moderating disposition between extremes, and "medievalism," which would seek to preserve cultural diversity within an overall unity of an envisioned Commonwealth of Europe; in the second, Burke dealt with the exceptional circumstances defined by the French Revolution, which he argued justified the supersession of the laws of the international order to wage an unlimited war against the French revolutionaries (Welsh 1995, 4–5). Welsh explained the apparent contradiction between these two moments as bridged by Burke's faith in a European commonwealth, united by a shared set of cultural values, that must be protected from internal or external threat of corruption at all costs.

Armitage (2000) arrives at a similar conclusion as he seeks to answer the question of whether and how Burke was a theorist of *raison d'état,* meaning whether he believed that national interest could justifiably supersede natural and universal moral laws. Armitage argues that Burke was a natural rights theorist in the mold of Emmerich de Vattel, rather than of Hugo Grotius or Samuel von Pufendorf, and believed that international intervention was justified in certain extreme cases, when the intervention was for the benefit of the community, whether national or international, or for the preservation of society itself.

The second interpretation of Burke as an international theorist focuses on India. In *Liberalism and Empire,* Mehta (1999) trains a critical eye on the universal claims of liberalism, and how such claims were formed and challenged by imperial encounters. British liberals involved in the colonial project in India—John Stuart Mill, notably—tended to view the unfamiliar through the lens of the familiar, either justifying its transformation or deeming it inscrutable. Burke, while still viewing India as radically unfamiliar, called for understanding across difference, rather than transformation or dismissal on the grounds of unintelligibility. Burke was particularly critical of the use of power without the obligation of understanding. As Mehta writes, "For Burke, the challenge of the British and the Indians understanding each other is the ongoing work of an adult conversation in which neither is assured of the outcome" (Mehta 1999, 34). Such a conversation should be driven by the sentiment of sympathy, an idea that Burke adopted from the work of David Hume.

Some scholars critique the interpretation of Burke as a critic of empire, citing his justificatory role in the British colonial apparatus.[3] Daniel I. O'Neill (2016), has argued at length that Burke's "conservative logic of empire" was integral to the maintenance and justification of the British imperial project. Scholars have also attempted to reconcile Burke's occasionally contradictory

[3] For examples, see Bourke 2007; and Marshall 2019. For a critical reading of Burke as someone who "managed to rescue the imperial mission" by assaulting its crimes, see Dirks 2006, 314.

stances on the British empire. Luke Gibbons, in his study of the origin of Burke's aesthetic theory in his experiences of political violence in Ireland, argues the tension between Burke's support and criticism of the British empire is because he was "a man deeply divided against himself" (Gibbons 2003). In his review of Gibbons's book, P.J. Marshall proposes that the perceived contradiction is due to an anachronistic use of the idea of "colonialism" (Marshall 2004). Whether or not Burke was a "postcolonial" thinker, the current literature has convincingly demonstrated that he was an ardent critic of parts of the British imperial project, even if he did not advocate for dismantling the empire.

Pitts (2018) builds on the work of scholars, like Armitage (2000), who have focused on Burke and the European community, and scholars, like Mehta (1999), who have focused on Burke and that which he conceived of as external to the European community. Pitts argues that Burke—along with other figures such as the French Orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron and the admiralty court judge William Scott, Lord Stowell—articulated a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of the global legal order than the view that came to dominate international law by the end of the nineteenth century (Pitts 2018, 24). Although Burke may have envisioned a European commonwealth united by common values, he also left space for the existence of other national and international communities and for other legal orders, such as that of India. He did so, Pitts writes, "with the aim of chastening European power through legal limits and obligations, including constraints that Europeans should recognize as binding themselves even when they could not presume to use them to bind others" (Pitts 2018, 25).

Pitts argues that the dominant school of international law steered away from the ideas of Burke and similar critics in the late nineteenth century, solving the conundrum of whether international law was peculiarly European or grounded in universal natural laws by redefining the European community as universal (Pitts 2018, 148–84). Twentieth century American conservative

interpretations of Burke, I argue, working in the shadow of nineteenth century Europe, have not engaged sufficiently with the subversive Burke that Pitts recovers.

In the following sections, as I consider how three factions of American conservatives and their interpretations of Burke might interact with and diverge from Burke as a critic of empire and voice of global legal pluralism, I use Burke to reveal the conceptual limits of how the field of possibility for how the United States should conduct foreign policy has often been construed. I use Burke's gravitational pull to tug on the boundaries of the geopolitical vision of the American conservative interpreters who have consistently endeavored to draw Burke into their orbit, opening up the possibilities of a new American Burkeanism, one that indicates how Burke's critique of empire might be applied in the context of the United States.

1. Leo Strauss and the neoconservatives

Leo Strauss, and the neoconservatives who took inspiration from him, stand consciously opposed to Burke. Even before he fled Nazi Europe in the late 1930s for teaching posts at the New School for Social Research and the University of Chicago, the conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss was critical of Burke. In one of his early writings on Zionism in 1924, Strauss cited Burke as a member of a "historical school" that opposed Hegelian apriorism, favoring an emphasis on "the irrational, the particular, moral freedom, and the constellations of forces and fate" (2012, 99n). Strauss was opposed to such thinking because it denied the existence of a transhistorical and universal moral truths. In *Natural Right and History* (1953), Strauss developed this argument further, dedicating a full section to his critique of Burke (1953, 294–323). Strauss argued that Burke put too much faith in the British constitution, which was particular and national, not timeless and universal like the natural law that Strauss sought.[4]

[4] Strauss continued to cite Burke throughout his career. His interpretation remained largely consistent. For example, see his discussion of Hegel and Burke as promoters of the separation of the cultural sphere of values from the state, which Strauss argues opened the door for the modern pluralization of cultures, another reference broadly in line with his

Strauss had no faith in the kind of organic holism associated with medieval Christianity, of which he saw Burke as an inheritor. He writes that such a tradition was too accommodating to liberal permissiveness, which he interprets as the leading to the rise of a relativistic attitude and the collapse of absolute standards of moral truth, and, potentially, Nazism. Strauss writes, "Liberal relativism has its roots in the [modern] natural right tradition of tolerance or in the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit of happiness as he understands happiness; but in itself it is a seminary of intolerance" (Strauss 1953, 5). Although Strauss supports Burke in his crusade against the French Revolution, he believes that Burke erred when he attempted to return to English tradition rather than the pursuit of universal, non-relativistic truths. Burke's recourse to history was too concerned with particulars; natural right could only deal in universals. Strauss interprets Burke's work on India as in line with his other work, critiquing it on the same basis (Strauss 1953, 295).

Strauss is now perhaps best known, outside of the discipline of political theory, as the intellectual forefather of a group called the "neoconservatives," some of whom studied with Strauss at Chicago, as Harvey Mansfield did, and some of whom studied with Strauss's students, as, for example, Paul Wolfowitz and Abram Shulsky studied under Joseph Cropsey (Norton 2008, 7). As Irving Kristol, one of the founding figures of neoconservatism, once defined this term: "A neoconservative is a leftwinger who has been ambushed by reality" (Spörl 2003). "Reality," in this case, was Soviet communism. The neoconservatives were a group of erstwhile Trotskyites who became disillusioned with the Soviet Union, the New Left, and the pacifist foreign policy of the

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critique of Burke as a proponent of "relativism" (Strauss 1964, 33), and also his discussions of Burke and his views on the division between legal reason and the prudence of the legislator, in which Strauss uses Burke to critique the idea of rule by the "men of learned professions," as being similar to—but not the same as—the rule by philosophers that Strauss promotes, acknowledging Burke's self-conception as a proponent of natural law, although denying that self-conception elsewhere (Strauss 1968, 17). He also cites Burke in other unrelated ways, too, such as in a footnote on the aesthetics of Lucretius (Strauss 1968, 137)) and as an ally in criticisms of the wisdom of common sense, quoting Burke, who wrote, "the generality of people are fifty years, at least, behind hand in their politics" (Strauss 1968, 213).

Democratic Party, all in rapid succession and embraced a specifically American form of Strauss's universal truth.[5]

The neoconservatives were particularly disdainful of what they saw as the anti-Americanism of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and united in opposition to George McGovern, the anti-war Democratic Party nominee for president in 1972. The neoconservatives saw their mission as a highly moral one, in pursuit of universal guiding moral values, a thread which connected them to Strauss. The group also took to heart the Straussian idea that elites have the right—and the obligation—to manipulate the public in pursuit and protection of absolute truths. They applied this position to the realm of foreign policy. First united by their support for the Vietnam War and their continued vehement anti-communism and aggressive foreign policy prescriptions during the Reagan years, Paul Wolfowitz and the other neoconservatives became known for their position in the George W. Bush administration and their justificatory hand in the American invasion of Iraq. The neoconservative brand characterized much of the foreign policy of the United States in the post-9/11 era.[6]

How might the neoconservatives align with or diverge from Burke? In Burke's later international theory, he did fear the spread of Jacobinism, and justified international intervention on such grounds. In this respect, the neoconservatives—fearful of the Jacobin tendencies of Soviet Communism and the ideology that they had disavowed—might see themselves as aligned with Burke. This comparison, however, is a fraught one. Not only does it neglect the other strand of Burke's international thought, which is intensely concerned with the arbitrary international use of power and critical of imperial ambitions; it also glosses over Burke's views on democracy. Crucially,

[5] As Anne Norton details in *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire,* the connection between Strauss's ideas and those of the neoconservatives is more complicated than it can be portrayed. Not all neoconservatives were students of Strauss. Not all of Strauss's students became his acolytes, and even among those who have dubbed themselves "Straussians" there is a significant divergence between those that see themselves as politically engaged and those that do not, and even view political engagement as anathema to their scholastic practice (Norton 2008). Here, I am particularly interested in the faction that did use Strauss as a guide in the arena of foreign policy.

[6] For a *New York Times* article describing the so-called "Leo-conservatives" in 2003, see Spörl 2003.

Burke was opposed to the spread of liberal democracy, let alone its protection, while the neoconservatives justified violent intervention towards that end. They were also, however, illiberal, believing that democracy as it had been conventionally construed was potentially too weak to counteract the threat of terrorism (Burke 1981). In this way, the neoconservatives inverted Burke, criticizing liberal democracy as being too permissive, rather than violently revolutionary, and justifying foreign intervention on that basis.

The neoconservatives can also be interpreted as opposed to Burke because of what some call their latent Bolshevism, a line of argument often advanced by conservative and liberal commentators who see themselves as more "moderate" than the neoconservatives. Francis Fukuyama, for example, accused the neoconservatives of harboring residual Trotskyists aspirations, writing that the neoconservatives, "believed that history can be pushed along with the right application of power and will. Leninism was a tragedy in its Bolshevik version, and it has returned as farce when practiced by the United States. Neoconservatism, as both a political symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something I can no longer support" (Fukuyama 2006).

Whether Burke as an anti-Jacobin can be reasonably summoned as an ally for the neoconservatives is a matter of debate, but Burke as a critic of empire is clearly opposed to the neoconservative project. In the trial of Warren Hastings, Burke saw the abuse of imperial power abroad as both oppressive to its victims and deleterious to those who wielded power. In his speech urging his fellow parliamentarians to pass the Fox India Bill, he said, "I am certain that every means, effectual to preserve India from oppression, is a guard to preserve the British constitution from its worst corruption" (Burke 1980, 5:385). The same dual argument could be deployed against the neoconservatives and their quest for the just use of authority to propel history in their preferred direction internationally. Burke would likely have had little sympathy for the Straussian idea of the assertion of power as justified by the pursuit of absolute truth. True to Strauss and their debt to him,

the neoconservatives stand opposed to Burke, both as a theorist of natural right and a critic of empire.

2. Russell Kirk and the paleoconservatives

The neoconservatives have also been opposed to another antagonist, the "paleoconservatives," who are united in their opposition to interventions by the United States government abroad. Writing in the same era as Strauss, Russell Kirk was one of the main intellectual antecedents of the paleoconservatives. Kirk, the political theorist best known for his influential book, *The Conservative Mind* (1953), fashioned himself as a follower of Burke. Unlike Strauss, Kirk viewed Burke as operating in the tradition of natural law, a tradition that Kirk supported. Kirk interpreted Burke as a pious man, emphasizing Christian values and traditional morality and opposing the discourse of natural rights advanced by liberal thinkers such as Locke. "Man's rights exist only when man obeys God's laws," Kirk once wrote (Kirk 1951, 442). Kirk was not opposed to liberalism in all cases and forms, articulating a version of natural right that incorporated modern ideals, such as the rights ensured domestically and internationally by liberal democracy, as long as the license that liberalism enabled was brought into check by the presence of traditional Christian morality. Kirk wrote that, "Burke the conservative was also Burke the liberal—the foe of arbitrary power, in Britain, in America, in India" (Kirk 1953, 13).

Even more so than Burke, Kirk was opposed to the arbitrary international use of power. In the decade after the Second World War, Kirk's thought was formed in the shadow of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States military. Kirk was concerned with the arbitrary use of power by nations, the risks of which were now amplified by the advent of the atomic bomb. Concerning the power of nations, Kirk wrote:

> It is ours already; and we have done with it what men always have done with pure power: we have employed it abominably … The learning of physical science, and the perfection of technology, instead of being put to the improvement of Reason, have been applied by modern

> man to achieve mastery over nature and humanity; and that mastery has been brutal (Kirk 1954, 266).

Kirk vowed to create fail-safes against the arbitrary abuse of power to ensure that the world would never see such horrors again (Kirk 1954, 268).

The paleoconservative movement consolidated in the 1980s in opposition to several trends in mainstream conservatism during the Reagan presidency: the influence of the neoconservatives; the turn in U.S. foreign policy from anticommunism to what they saw as neo-Wilsonianism and excessive interventionism abroad; and what they believed to be the declining mores of the mainstream Reagan right (Francis 2012). The term was coined by Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried in 1986, both of whom were involved with *Chronicles,* the flagship publication of the movement based at the Rockford Institute, a conservative think-tank in Rockford, Illinois (Drolet and Williams 2022). In the 1990s, the influence of the paleoconservatives peaked with the series of bids for president made by Pat Buchanan, in 1992, 1996, and 1999.

The group defined themselves, like Kirk, as proponents of an older, Christian morality. In the United States, this meant that the paleoconservatives, who were predominantly Catholic, also appealed to an often-racist nostalgia for the American South, and opposed gay rights, church-state separation, and federal encroachment on local government. Internationally, they were united in opposition to the United States intervening abroad, appealing, like Kirk, to an international form of natural right that would prohibit the arbitrary use of power. As opponents of international intervention and the arbitrary use of power, the paleoconservatives were aligned with Burke, the critic of empire. But insofar as they thought the international order should be governed by a universal, Christian form of morality, they departed from Burke, who, as Pitts (2018) argued, articulated an international order that did not view the world as subject to a singular set of moral laws.

A closer look at the international vision of paleoconservatives reveals other divergences, too. In 1997, the paleoconservative Scott McConnell published an op-ed imploring the Republican-controlled Congress to oppose Puerto Rican statehood (McConnell 1997). As the centennial of the year that Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship in the United States—although not, significantly, the right to vote—approached, the governor of Puerto Rico, Pedro Rossello, lobbied for Puerto Rico's transition from commonwealth status to statehood. McConnell feared such a movement, citing the poverty of the island and the drain on federal spending that its statehood might bring about. McConnell also feared the incorporation of a predominantly Spanish-speaking state, because of political discord, the inflammation of separatist sentiment, and the potential for a new, liberal voting block which "might well become a powerful institutional voice for making Spanish a quasi-official language of the United States" (McConnell 1997).

Although McConnell, like Burke, feared the corrupting influence of empire on the metropole, his fear was based on different grounds. Burke was concerned about the corrupting moral effect that the cruelty of empire might have on those involved in its administration; he also argued against empire because of the injustice wrought against the subjects of domination. Although Burke did not call for the immediate dismantling of the British empire—which McConnell might align himself with—and argued against the forceful democratization of imperial subjects, he based his critique on sympathy and a faith in a form of self-determination, although one governed by historically-developing norms rather than radical breaks with the past. As Mehta wrote, "ultimately for Burke the empire is horrifyingly superficial precisely because it does not take the task of understanding and recognition seriously. It pertains only to the surface of things, much as the acquiring of fortune, and the exercise of raw power, can grip the fantasy of a reckless adolescent" (Mehta 1999, 34). Although it is unclear whether Burke would support Puerto Rican

independence—perhaps arguing for some "middle path"—he would likely find McConnell's argument against Puerto Rican statehood distasteful, a power-hungry cry for imperial authority.

He would not be alone. McConnell was fired from the *New York Post* for his views. He took refuge in a new publication, *The American Conservative,* which he founded with fellow paleoconservatives Pat Buchanan and Taki Theodoracopolous in 2002, that became a defining mouthpiece for the later paleoconservatives as they clashed with the neoconservatives of the Bush administration over the invasion of Iraq.

The ethos of the paleoconservatives experienced an unexpected renaissance with the election of Donald J. Trump. Buchanan himself viewed Trump's election as a vindication of his own nationalist ideas (Helleiner 2021). In 2017, Buchanan told Tim Alberta, a journalist with *Politico Magazine,* "I was elated, delighted that Trump picked up on the exact issues on which I challenged Bush," referring to his losing bid for against George H.W. Bush in 1996, during which he trumpeted a "new nationalism" focusing on "forgotten Americans" who had been left behind by trade deals, immigration policies and foreign interventions, and deployed a slogan, "Make America First Again," that bore striking similarities to two of Trump's signature phrases (Alberta 2017).

Gottfried, to whom the term paleoconservative is often attributed, was also instrumental in the creation of the "alternative right," or "alt-right," a term used to describe the movement that gathered behind figures such as the antisemitic conspiracy theorist, white supremacist, and neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, who was also once an editor at *The American Conservative,* and called for the conversion of the United States into a white ethno-state. Although some have argued that Trump should not be considered in the paleoconservative tradition (Hawley 2017), and Spencer was fired from *The American Conservative* and described by McConnell as "a bit extreme for us" (Harkinson

2016), the most virulently hateful elements of paleoconservatism were given new life during the Trump presidency.[7]

As with Strauss and the neoconservatives, the line of influence from Kirk to the paleoconservatives is fragmented. It is not fair or accurate to equate the ideas of Kirk and all of the subsequent paleoconservatives, let alone Kirk and the alt-right. I do want to argue, however, that the views of those influenced by Kirk indicate the limitations of Kirk's interpretation of Burke. While Kirk did champion Burke's criticism of the arbitrary use of force abroad, his recourse to the universality of an American Catholic morality diverged from Burke as he has been portrayed by scholars such as Mehta (1999) and Pitts (2018). Neither Kirk nor the paleoconservatives would seem to countenance that the idea that there could be other communities—such as India—separate from, but deserving of the respect of, the moral community of which they see themselves as members.

3. Hans Morgenthau and realism

Hans J. Morgenthau, the émigré German scholar often credited with the creation of the tradition of international relations theory called "realism" (or "Realism"), was an admiring reader of Burke.[8] In his influential book, *Politics among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau quotes Burke with consistent reverence. In one passage, he calls Burke Britain's "greatest political thinker" (Morgenthau 1948, 121). In another, he goes further, calling Burke "the greatest depository of political wisdom in the English language" (1948, 133). Morgenthau's engagements with Burke, however, focus on Burke's thinking on the protection of the European community from existential threat after the revolution in France. Morgenthau does not draw on Burke as a critic of empire. Building on the foundation laid

[7] Throughout Trump's presidency and afterwards, he—and a growing wing of the Republican Party—has become less defined solely by an anti-interventionist stance, and more by sympathy for authoritarian leaders across the world. The growing support for Vladimir Putin and Russia, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is indicative of this transformation. For a journalistic work engaging with this transformation, which defines this new faction in conservative foreign policy as "Jacksonian," with reference to the angry, nationalistic, anti-establishment culture that brought Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1829, see Smith 2022.

[8] For recent studies of Morgenthau and the history of realism, see Navari 2018 and Specter 2022.

by Morgenthau, subsequent thinkers in the tradition of realism broadly construed, such as Kissinger, also diverged from Burke, the critic of empire, focusing on Burke's thinking on the unity of the European community, rather than on the moral limits of that community and on the moral perils of exploitation and conquest.

In *Politics among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau outlines his theory of international relations, which takes the form of both a theory of how international politics tends to function and a prescription for how global peace should be brought about in the fragile early postwar era. Morgenthau writes, "In the age of two worlds and of total war the preservation of peace has become the prime concern of all nations" (1948, 8). Writing in a new, increasingly bipolar world, redefined by the existential threat of nuclear annihilation, Morgenthau argues that peace could be brought about through two mechanisms: the first was the balance of power, or, in other words, "the self-regulatory mechanism of the social forces which manifest itself in the struggle for power on the international scene"; the second was ideals and the law, or, the "normative limitations upon that struggle in the form of international law, international morality, and world public opinion" (1948, 9).

In *Politics among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau is concerned with the existential threat of global annihilation posed by the atomic bomb. He is also interested in how the pursuit of power in international politics could be harnessed towards the end of international peace. With these aims in mind, Morgenthau is most interested in Burke's thinking on stability of the European community of nations and its protection from the existential threat posed by the revolution in France. In *Politics among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau's quotations from Burke are taken entirely from his writings on international affairs after the revolution in France, specifically his essays "Thoughts on French Affaires" and "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies with Respect to France."

In two passages, Morgenthau summons Burke as an ally for his theory of the balance of powers. While theorizing about how conflicts between powerful nations can serve to protect weak

nations, he argues, "Nowhere has this function of the balance of power to preserve the independence of weak nations been more clearly recognized than by Edmund Burke," and quotes Burke's 1791 remarks on how the continued conflict between the King of Prussia and the German Emperor ensured the continued maintenance of the liberties of Germany (Morgenthau 1948, 133). In a second passage, Morgenthau again cites Burke as a theorist of the balance of powers, quoting Burke on the protection of German liberties through the sustained conflict between the King of Prussia and the German emperor (Morgenthau 1948, 48; Burke 1889, IV:331). Morgenthau fashions Burke as a proponent of a Europe united, and sustained, through the competition and division between its powers.

In one passage, Morgenthau encounters Burke's criticism of empire. While Morgenthau champions Burke as a theorist of restraint in international affairs, Burke, in the quoted passage, calls the British empire in India "an awful thing." Morgenthau quotes the passage, however, not with an emphasis on the moral perils of the overextension of empire, but rather with an emphasis on the pragmatic considerations of the possible collapse of an overextended empire (Morgenthau 1948, 121–22). Morgenthau quotes Burke at length:

> Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take on precaution against our own. I must fairly say, I dread our own power and our own ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded. It is ridiculous to say we are not men, and that, as men, we shall never wish to aggrandize ourselves in some way or other. Can we say that even at this very hour we are not invidiously aggrandized? We are already in possession of almost all the commerce of the world. Our empire in India is an awful thing. If we should come to be in a condition not only to have all this ascendant in commerce, but to be absolutely able, without the least control, to hold the commerce of all other nations totally dependent upon our good pleasure, we may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard-of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that, sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin (Burke 1889, IV:457).

Morgenthau praises the warning that Burke issued in the above passage, from his 1793 speech, "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies with Respect to France." Morgenthau also praises Great Britain for heeding this warning of restraint, and for maintaining its empire by doing so, implicitly arguing

for the emerging hegemon, the United States, to adopt a similar practice. Even in his interpretation of a quote in which Burke criticizes the British imperial project in India on moral grounds, Morgenthau does not highlight Burke's moral critique of the British empire, but rather his prudential worry about the international imbalance that the overextension of empire could cause.

As with Strauss and the neoconservatives, and Kirk and the paleoconservatives, the line of influence from Morgenthau to subsequent realists is full of fragmentation, reinterpretation, and contestation. Kissinger, one of Morgenthau's mentees, departed from Morgenthau on matters of policy during the war in Vietnam, when Morgenthau was opposed to involvement by the United States, criticizing what he saw as the improvident and foolish use of needless military power.[9] Morgenthau grounded his criticisms in concerns about ideological crusades, akin to Burke's concerns about the revolution in France, and concerns about the imbalance that could be brought about by the needless overextension a great power.

Despite their differences, Morgenthau and Kissinger both clashed with the neoconservatives. In fact, the neoconservative ethos was formed in part in opposition to Kissinger, despite the fact that few would mistake Kissinger for a peacenik. More commonly, he has been accused of committing war crimes for his authoritative involvement in U.S.-backed violence in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Chile, Cyprus and East Timor. Critical voices have proposed that he, like Warren Hastings, should be put to trial.[10] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, as the neoconservatives and their allies in the Senate, which then included Democrats such as Henry M. Jackson, clashed with the antiwar faction of the Democratic Party over whether and how the defense budget should be increased, they also clashed with Kissinger.

[9] For a discussion of Morgenthau's critique of American intervention in Vietnam see Zambernardi 2011.
[10] See Hitchens 2001.

As an architect of détente with the Soviet Union and of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks agreements, SALT and SALT II, Kissinger's work rested on the assumption that the best way to ensure the safety of the United States and the world was not through the eradication of the Soviet Union but rather through a set of rules-based agreements between the two nuclear superpowers. Kissinger's strategizing rested on a Cold War paradox. As historian Mario Del Pero described, "to achieve security, the two superpowers agreed to put their safety in the hands of another subject, and not just those of a simple other but rather of the absolute Cold War enemy against whom such immense destructive potential had been created in the first place" (Del Pero 2011). The neoconservatives could never accept such a paradox; it both eliminated the exceptional status of the United States—reducing America, tragically in their eyes, to another nation among nations—and created too much dependency on the Soviet Union, the absolute ideological enemy of the neoconservatives. The neoconservatives did not hope for parity, but rather strategic advantage.

In 1976, a group of neoconservatives created the Committee on Present Danger, an organization that aimed to promote bipartisan opposition to détente. They also saw Kissingerian foreign policy as undercutting the moral dimension of their struggle to defeat communism and assert the universal values of the United States across the world. The neoconservatives saw strategic interdependence as nihilistic and relativistic. They wanted to ensure that the struggle of Cold War remained Manichean, a battle between freedom and "totalitarianism." Jackson, the main governmental representative of the neoconservatives at the time, clashed with Kissinger publicly and repeatedly over such issues in the first half of the 1970s.

In foreign policy debates surrounding the invasion of Iraq and subsequent American involvement in the middle east in the 2000s, a schism between neoconservatives and realists persisted.[11] Morgenthau and Kissinger, working in the realist tradition, both tended to accept the

[11] For an example of a debate between a neoconservative and a realist, see Muravchik and Walt 2008.

idea of living in a world occupied by countervailing forces and communities, some of which they might find morally repugnant but with whom they would nevertheless cooperate. In this way, they come close to aligning with Burke, the critic of empire.

Another aspect of Burke's thought, however, has been largely neglected in the tradition of realism: Burke's criticism of the moral perils of imperial subjugation and conquest. Although Morgenthau's work was far from devoid of ethical considerations, he was not primarily concerned with the moral ills of domination, suffered by both its perpetrators and subjects.[12] By laying the groundwork of realist thought with an emphasis on Burke's consideration of the protection of the European community through the balance of powers and opposition to wanton ideological crusades, rather than his considerations of the moral perils of conquest and empire, Morgenthau defined the field of possibility of realist thought.

Conclusion: The Limits to Universalism?

What might American Burkeanism be in the arena of foreign policy? The three factions of conservatives I have examined provide limited guidance. Strauss and the neoconservatives rightly lay no claim to Burke. Kirk and the paleoconservatives have claimed Burke, but their faith in universal Catholic morality conflicts with Burke's criticisms of a recourse to universal morality as a guide for action abroad. Morgenthau and the realists lay a claim to Burke, too, but with an emphasis more on Burkean prudence than on Burke's considerations of how the binding morals of the European community should interact with that which is external to it.

What of Henry Kissinger? In Kissinger's 2012 speech at the 30th Anniversary Gala of *The New Criterion*—in which Kissinger claims the label of "American Burkeanism"—Kissinger argues

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[12] Some (Cristol 2008) attribute the more value-neutral version of realism to the advent of neo-realism with *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979).

that Burke provided a solution to the antinomies of American foreign policy (2012). In his speech, "The limits to universalism," Kissinger criticizes both an extreme version of *Realpolitik* that would not incorporate guiding values into considerations of foreign policy and a hawkish interventionism that would assign America the role of violently intervening abroad to spread American values (2012). Neither of these two extremes, Kissinger argues, met "the Burkean test of accounting for the full variety of human experience and the complexity of statesmanship" (2012).

Kissinger interprets Burke as a guide for a foreign policy that would continue to aim at the ideal of a world order of states embracing participatory governance based on agreed-upon rule but undertake progress towards such a goal slowly, with cautious prudence. In support of his vision, Kissinger quotes Burke, who, in 1789, wrote that the practice of prudence, "leads us rather to acquiesce in some qualified plan that does not come up to the full perfection of the abstract idea, than to push for the more perfect, which cannot be attained without tearing to pieces the whole contexture of the commonwealth" (Kissinger 2012).

Aspects of Kissinger's vision of a foreign policy that combine realism with a consideration of the role of values in history align with Burke. As Fukuyama once wrote, in a capsule review of Welsh's *Edmund Burke and International Relations* (1995) in *Foreign Affairs*, "Never simply a realist, Burke believed there was a moral and cultural underpinning to the European state system, and that concepts like legitimacy and sovereignty had to have a substantive as well as a procedural meaning" (Fukuyama 1995). The Burke of Welsh and Fukuyama might accord with Kissinger. But writing before Mehta and Pitts, Welsh and Fukuyama did not focus on the limits of the moral community of European states that Burke outlined in his writings and speech on India and other colonies. Nor did Kissinger.

In this way, Kissinger also fails to do justice to Burke, the critic of empire. Although tempered by Burkean prudence, Kissinger's vision of foreign policy still aspires to push the world

towards a particular, ideal future state of affairs, justified and guided by a faith in universal values. Between him and the neoconservatives, Kissinger writes, "the difference is less one of destination than of pacing" (2012). Kissinger reveals his divergence with Burke, the critic of empire, when he summons Burke as an ally. Burke, Kissinger wrote, confronted a conservative paradox: "Values are universal, but generally have to be implemented as part of a process, that is to say, gradually" (2012).

After the work of Mehta and Pitts, it is not clear that Burke thought values were universal, and less clear that he thought they should be implemented universally. While Kissinger (2012) gestures towards "the full variety of human experience" and towards the importance of historically formed cultural inheritances and national values, he continues to envision history converging towards an international order that would mimic many of the values that he conceives of as particularly present in the United States. Even if tempered by a Burkean prudence, the United States continues to play a singular role in bringing about the desired future order.

While Kissinger articulates one limit to universalism, Pitts recovers another. In *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (2018), Pitts examines the European imperial origins of the universalist aspirations of modern international law, which, she argues, show the way in which the purportedly uniquely universalistic nature of European law was never a true universalism, always privileging Europeans and Christians over others. Pitts also uncovers a subversive moment in the history of international law in the eighteenth century, when European thinkers—Burke among them—engaged in debates about the limits of the European law of nations, and of imperial domination justified by the absolute superiority of European moral truths (2018, 21).

In the nineteenth century, Pitts describes the decline of the pluralistic vision developed by eighteenth-century critics: first, in the first half of the nineteenth century, through Emmerich de Vattel, the advancement of the notion that Europeans should not see their laws as binding them in their actions in other parts of the world; then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the

redefinition of the European community and its laws as universal. This dual transformation buried the critical voice of those, like Burke, who envisioned a form of European law that would include constraints on European power that would bind Europeans even when they could not be equally used to bind others (2018, 25).

Kissinger is one among many inheritors of the consolidation and universalization of the European law of nations that Pitts describes as taking place over the course of the nineteenth century (Pitts 2018, 148–84). Kissinger's intellectual background, in fact, provides an uncannily apt demonstration of how the nineteenth-century conservative restoration in Europe has served to obfuscate the considerations about the limits of the European moral and legal community broached by critics such as Burke in the eighteenth century. At Harvard in 1953, Kissinger wrote his dissertation on the Concert of Europe, a coalition of rulers in Austria, Prussia, Russia, and Britain who united in opposition to Napoleon after his defeat at Waterloo in 1815 and sought to create an international order that would restore stability to the continent (Mazower 2012, 3). Some participants in the Concert of Europe, such as the Austrian diplomat Friedrich von Gentz, explicitly took inspiration from Burke and his argument for international intervention after the French Revolution to protect the European community against existential threat (Mazower 2012, 5).

In the Concert of Europe, the young Kissinger found lessons for how the United States might be able to incorporate the new revolutionary superpower, the Soviet Union, into a rules-based international order. Unlike Burke, the members of the Concert of Europe tended not to believe that the maintenance or restoration of pre-revolutionary Europe was possible. They argued, rather, for the creation of new relationship between European states that would prevent the spread of revolutionary sentiment or radicalism (Mazower 2012, 6). Over half a decade after his doctoral research, in his 2012 speech, Kissinger's vision of the incremental pursuit of an integrated, rules-based international order bears more semblance to the Concert of Europe and their departures from

Burke than it does to Burke and his considerations of the limits of European community. As Kissinger argues for a move beyond the limits of the dichotomy between realism and idealism in foreign policy, he demonstrates the continued existence of other imaginative limits—namely, the continued use of the European community of nations as a model for the ideal, desired world order.

The Burke that has been obscured by the focus on the unity of the European community is Burke, the critic of empire, who advocated for restraint abroad without grounding such restraint—or any other action—in a notion of absolute cultural superiority. Even if Indian society was a form of life that violated Burke's deepest convictions or appeared inscrutable, he, unlike Mill, could, as Mehta writes, "countenance the possibility of not associating with it, or humbly acknowledging opacity as a condition against which he has no simple and a priori trump—certainly not of power or tutelage" (Mehta 1999, 215). In this way, Burke, the famed conservative, articulates an international order defined by a respectful international conversation across difference—a different type of liberal world order than the one that was articulated by his liberal contemporaries or that would come to predominate.

In the context of the twentieth and twenty-first century United States, Burke, the critic of empire who advocated moral restraint without moral superiority, is a strikingly unfamiliar voice. The Burke who advocated for the existence of a federated international community of European nations that would be united in certain values, but also argued for the continued existence of other orders and communities, is not found in popular interpretations of Burke. Nor are a similar set of views. Kirk grounded arguments about non-intervention in a universal, Catholic notion of morality; after Kirk, the paleoconservatives grounded arguments against intervention abroad in notions of American cultural superiority. Morgenthau, like Burke, countenanced the practice of coexistence with enemies, but advocated for action primarily in the national interest, not bound by the moral and legal limits of one community of nations; some in the realist tradition after him, like Kissinger,

still envisioned the goal of realism as incremental progress towards a globally integrated community of nations, modeled after the European commonwealth. Perhaps Strauss, in opposition, interpreted Burke most closely to how he has been recently reinterpreted as an opponent of action grounded in faith in a universal version of natural right. But Strauss, and the neoconservatives after him, confronted this image with fear, not praise.

The Burke who argued for moral restraint without moral superiority could provide a guide to a conception of the role of the United States in the world that is neither defined by wanton, violent intervention abroad, nor by "America first" restraint or chauvinism, nor by paranoid anti-Jacobinism, nor by purportedly value-neutral *realpolitik*. This Burke could transcend the cleavage between extreme realism and extreme idealism in foreign policy, but in a different way than Kissinger suggested—not aspiring to push the world incrementally towards an ideal unity based on American values or modeled after the European community, but rather operating as a powerful actor and member of the international community, recognizing certain restraints as binding on itself even when it cannot presume to use them bind others. As the postwar, unipolar world order defined by the hegemony of the United States fades, Burke could provide an image of a United States that would not be separate and superior from the rest of the world, nor stand in for its entirety.

I do not mean to argue that Burke should be seen as eternally correct, or that the ideas of American conservative thinkers who cite Burke would be objectively superior if they had interpreted Burke more veraciously. Burke could have been wrong in his own time, and any effort to use Burke as a guide for contemporary action will necessitate creative acts of reinterpretation. As Pitts writes, "there may be no untainted well from which we can draw" (2018, 27). But I hope to have shown that bringing Burke, the critic of empire, into contact with his postwar American conservative inheritors is a productively disorienting exercise.

Unshackled from his captivity as an American conservative icon, what might Burke reveal about other moments and movements? How would Burke align with or diverge from the decolonial internationalists of Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire* (Getachew 2019)? What might his work and the international theory of W.E.B. Du Bois mutually reveal through comparison (Du Bois 2022; Getachew 2019)? How might he interact with the transatlantic attempts to assert Anglo-American racial unification and supremacy over the international order described in Duncan Bell's *Dreamworlds of Race* (Bell 2020)? As long as we live in our modern world, still shaped by aspirations and the questions raised by the revolutions of the eighteenth century, Burke, who sat halfway between our own epoch and what came before, serves as an enigmatic and unsettling cypher and prism.

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