Burke's Prejudice: The Appraisals of Russell Kirk and Christopher Lasch

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Introduction

Edmund Burke’s well-known criticisms of the French Revolution are premised on his analysis of prejudice. Russell Kirk and Christopher Lasch have substantial discussions of this aspect of Burke’s thought. But though the interpretations of Kirk and Lasch seem basically the same—differing, as it seems, only in emphasis—their appraisals of Burke are quite different. It would therefore be of some interest for penetrating the subtleties of Burke’s thought to put these two appraisals in dialogue with each other. I shall begin, therefore, by offering some needed clarifications of Burke’s thought and then turn directly to the interpretations of Kirk and Lasch.

Burke and Prejudice

For our purposes, we need to focus on two aspects of Burke’s thought: first, the critique of Enlightenment rationalism by means of the doctrine of prejudice and, second, how Burke understands prejudice in the light of what we would nowadays call the social order.

Enlightenment “Prejudice” and Enlightenment “Reason”

Burke insists on the significance of—indeed the primacy of—prejudice for the social order. Unfortunately, contemporary usage has so narrowed the meaning of the term “prejudice” that we can hardly understand what Burke means. For, in our day, “prejudice” conveys a characteristically negative connotation: it is understood that a person should not, should never have prejudices. Furthermore, “prejudice” generally expresses the idea of negative attitudes toward persons of other races. Such usage was not typical, or at least not necessary, to Burke’s time. What explains this shift in meaning?

The term “prejudice”, as its parts suggest, means “pre-judgment”, i.e., rendering judgment without or prior to exact knowledge of what is being judged. Thus “prejudice” signifies a complex of two distinct elements: on the one hand, a judgment, i.e., a claim to truth; on the other, a lack of exact, analytic or scientific justification for that judgment. We need to keep in mind that these are indeed two distinct elements of prejudice. For a judgment’s
lacking justification is not the same as a judgment’s lacking truth: a judgment can fully well be true without scientific, exact or analytic justification.

Now the ideal of Enlightenment culture was to be a man free from the darkness of prejudice. The genesis of this idea is not difficult to construct. For the French Enlightenment, this referred mainly to the “shadows” of organized, “monkish” religion, with its implication of belief from authority and limits to autonomous acting. But it also meant to be free of the darkness of provinciality, i.e., not to be restricted to what one’s region, country, or culture suggested to be the good life. For to believe or accept, either on authority (as in religion) or from reverence for custom and tradition (as in provincialism) is to judge without justification: it was to be prejudiced. It was therefore antagonistic to the ideals of Enlightenment.

Thus, historically speaking, the assumption that prejudice is opposed to reason arises not so much from the nature of reason but from a specific conception of reason, that of the Enlightenment. It is basically because we unconsciously accept the Enlightenment concept of reason that we tend to think prejudice opposed to reason. Burke, for his part, uses “prejudice” in the older sense, prior to the shift in meaning imposed by Enlightenment assumptions.

Characteristic of enlightened reason is that it is both scientistic and individualistic. It is scientistic, in that it insists on an exact analysis of an object prior to judgment and, concomitantly, on the denigration of traditional forms of philosophical or theological reason. Indeed, scientific reason is, in a sense normative, for all rational activity, even that outside of science proper. Consequently, not only philosophy and religion but also the acceptance of tradition or custom were singled out as contrary to the spirit of this scientific ideal.

But Enlightenment reason was also individualistic: it required that one “think for oneself” and not accept anything as true on the basis of authority, faith, tradition, common experience, etc. It is worth noting that this feature of Enlightenment rationality does not seem wholly consistent with the essentially communal character of science. But be that as it may, this attitude, one which we might name “epistemological individualism,” since it refers to one’s own authority in knowledge, pervaded the entire age.

Naturally, the individualistic ideal did not apply directly to science, but to things like religion, politics, culture, the social order, i.e., only the most important things of human life! The person, then, who did not live up to this individualistic ideal, who held to things on account of tradition, custom, authority, whether because of family, region, State or Church, was held to be “prejudiced”, i.e., a person who made judgments prior to “rational analysis” or without rational foundation. Hence, Enlightenment prejudice and Enlightenment “rationality” are basically contraries.
Burke on Prejudice

In contrast, Burke does not assume rationality and prejudice to be opposed. He sees clearly that Enlightenment rationality is contrary to prejudice; but he does not restrict rationality to the limits of Enlightenment ideals. What then does Burke mean by prejudice?

Prejudice is a kind of rationality: it is the collective, non-propositional knowledge of peoples, races, cultures: a wisdom handed down through custom and tradition. The natural impulses of the heart and mind which come from partaking in the continuous activities of a culture and society are prejudices. This suggests that, for Burke, the essential characteristic of prejudice is not that it is judged "prior to analysis", since a good deal of this sort of wisdom is very likely not subject to analysis at all. But what is characteristic of prejudice is that it is rational and wise, even if we cannot analyze why it is rational and wise. It is unnecessary to stress, I suppose, that in precisely this respect, prejudice is most opposed to Enlightenment rationality.6

For Burke, prejudice is the complex of knowledge, attitudes, responses, and habits which is expected for a civilized mode of life within a given community. Thus there is an essentially social dimension to prejudice. Needless to say, such a conception of prejudice is neither scientistic nor individualistic. But though representing neither of these traits of Enlightenment rationality, it possesses a kind of rationality, since it is composed of the wisdom of generations. This is why Burke could set it up in opposition to the Enlightenment ideal of rationality. The Enlightenment thinkers had, in essence, only their own generation on the basis of which to judge, whereas the customs and traditions of the European nations had the wisdom of many generations as their basis.

In a sense, one could say that prejudice arises from custom, from the common wisdom, values, ethos, of a given social unit.7 These latter are formative of the character of a people and, therefore, formative of the political order as well. Burke thought prejudice so fundamental for politics that he conceived of good laws as founded in part upon prejudice. For laws are not mere formal dictates of those in power but derive from that same wisdom--when they are good laws--which is the prejudice of those who are governed. Thus the foundation of the political order is in the already existing social order, which presumably contains the wisdom, the values, the attitudes toward life characteristic of a people.8

One of the chief political errors of the French Revolutionists, in the mind of Burke, is that they founded laws, constitutions, regimes on principles not derived from prejudice, i.e., from the natural and (relatively) constant habits of heart and mind of the people, but from abstractions.9 By "abstractions," Burke does not mean principle, which he thinks should inform political action and which he thinks to be founded on human nature. Rather, "abstraction" refers to sham principles, i.e., generalities which function as

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principles but are in fact founded neither on human nature nor on the prejudices of the people governed.\textsuperscript{10} Political prudence in part consists in knowing the character of the people through its prejudices. Governance is less a question of abstract quasi-scientific "laws" than the movement toward ordered liberty and justice through knowing the affections of the people.\textsuperscript{11} Not obedient fear in the face of power but love for a mother country should ground the political order; not by understanding abstractions, but by motivating love should princes and potentates rule.\textsuperscript{12}

Burke had a good deal more confidence in the efficacy of prejudice for the social order than he had in the "Reason" of the French Revolutionists.\textsuperscript{13} Their confidence in their own judgments, their conviction of the promise of a new age which would purposely break from the old, these features did not commend themselves to so convinced a conservative thinker as Burke.\textsuperscript{14} For Burke believed that the common moral experience of mankind or of the nation as a whole was far more certain than that of theoretical and speculative claims about the nature of the state or the moral order.\textsuperscript{15} Such convictions were not wholly outside the ideals of the Enlightenment itself: e.g., we see Kant's greater confidence in natural moral insight than in theoretical ethics.\textsuperscript{16} Still, Burke represents, in most respects, a movement toward counter-Enlightenment, a movement which was to take hold of the conservative, Anglo-American imagination and continue to influence politics and political thinking to our day.

\textit{Kirk's Analysis of Burke}

In his magisterial \textit{The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot}\textsuperscript{17}, Russell Kirk describes prejudice as "the half-intuitive knowledge that enables men to meet the problems of life without logic-chopping." The description is accurate, particularly as regards the function of prejudice. Within a given community, prejudice acts as a non-inferred knowledge, a knowledge that immediately influences judgment and action within a community or social order, without requiring the cold, scientistic reasoning of the Enlightenment. This shows the importance of prejudice for social life. Kirk quotes Chesterfield, who wrote: "A prejudice is by no means, (though generally thought so) an error; on the contrary, it may be a most unquestioned truth, though it be still a prejudice in those who, without any examination, take it upon trust and entertain it by habit."\textsuperscript{18}

This is indeed at the heart of Burke's and Kirk's understanding of prejudice. For "prejudice" is not a term descriptive of the \textit{truth value} of the knowledge or belief in question. Prejudice refers rather to the \textit{way in which the knowledge or belief is held}. Something held to be true \textit{in the manner of a prejudice} is not, for all that, the less true. Rather, genuine knowledge can be held prejudicially; but such knowledge is not, for all that, less authentically knowledge. This is, indeed, a basic confusion embedded in Enlightenment rationality, especially derived from its individualism: the
conflation of epistemological individualism with objectivity and truth. The Enlightenment assumption is that anything that is held to be true without the individual himself knowing \textit{why} it is true, is prejudice; and therefore, it should not be held as true. It is precisely in this fashion that the Enlightenment could dispose of authority, whether Church, monarchy or tradition. But obviously the truth of something is not a function of knowing the evidence or reasons for it: indeed, most of what we know concerning our practical lives seems to be of this sort.

Indeed, why should we assume that knowledge held as prejudice is held irrationally? Might there not be a certain presumption of truth in the very reality of custom and tradition? Burke and Kirk after him ever considered the prejudices of people, if truly founded on the customs and traditions of the ages, the surer judge of what is reasonable for governance than Enlightenment reason. Custom and tradition tend to include within them a kind of wisdom. There is nothing mystical in this conception: it is largely a practical point. It is the point that if some practice is handed down through generations, and if therefore it has not only been practiced recently but has been a part of the practice of generations, it has also been judged and lived out by those generations. This suggests that there is at least some wisdom in the practice, since, had there been none in it, the practice would have been changed over time. Even if we do not see \textit{why} it is wise, the mere fact that it has been practiced gives presumption in its favor. Why should it be that one accept some new law and new practice, which is untried and, even worse, the product of some single thinker or a few professionals or bureaucrats, rather than the wisdom of thousands throughout many generations? This is what led Burke to say that philosophers would “better occupy their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in” tradition, rather than attempt to invent new principles by “pure reason” which are not rooted in such prejudices, in the customs or traditions of the people.

This brings us to the second point, namely, the primacy of prejudice and custom with respect to the law and the work of government. Prejudice is understood not merely in terms of \textit{knowledge} but also as a guarantee of the \textit{continuity} of habits of life within any social order. Kirk emphasized always that order is the first object of politics and the first ideal of the society taken as a whole. Consequently, prejudice, that is to say the natural impulses of persons who live in a community and who have followed and internalized the traditions and customs of their community, are of primary importance for the order of that community. Added to this are the advantages of prejudice for governance. If the people are already habituated to custom, this form of life is bound to be cherished and thus it does not require government and legal agency to impose this order. For this reason, in a passage quoted by both Kirk and Lasch, we find Burke saying: “Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend.”

Burke thought the laws and government of the political order should, if
it is wise and organically grown, arise from the habits and customs of the social order. It should be, so to speak, native grown, not imposed from above. It is for this reason that both Burke and Kirk deplore the abstractions of the politics of their respective ages. The social order is not only broader than the political order, it is also, in many ways, foundational for it. This would even include, of course, the tradition of obedience to the rule of law. Custom and tradition have a positive role for stabilizing the social order and for grounding the laws in the habits of the people. It is therefore with perfect consistency that both rail against the sophisters, economists and calculators of their ages, who uproot the habits of the people, opposing the “provinciality” of old habits to the “cosmopolitan” culture of the Enlightenment. For Burke and for Kirk, rationality was more likely to be embedded in customs and habits than in the excesses of French Enlightenment, which is why prejudice was, as Burke said, to be “preferred ten thousand times” to the rationality of the Enlightenment.

Furthermore, these prejudices fill out, so to speak, what the indeterminacy of concepts like “human nature” leave empty. Enlightenment thinkers too claimed to found the law and the state in human nature, but in a way so abstract as to fail to correspond to any actually existing human nature. Kirk saw in this Burkean notion of prejudice a way of grounding law and politics in human nature without human nature itself turning into an abstraction:

Much read in history and much practiced in the conduct of political affairs, Burke knew that men are not naturally good, but are beings of mingled good and evil, kept in obedience to a moral law chiefly by the force of custom and habit, which the revolutionaries would discard as so much antiquated rubbish. He knew that all the advantages of society are the produce of intricate human experience over many centuries, not to be amended overnight by some coffee-house philosopher. He knew religion to be man’s greatest good, and established order to be fundamental of civilization, and hereditary possession to be the prop of liberty and justice, and the mass of beliefs we often call “prejudices” to be the moral sense of humanity. He set his face against the revolutionaries like a man who finds himself suddenly beset by robbers.25

There is in both Burke and Kirk a general trust in the prejudices of the people and a distrust in “metaphysical politics,” a politics based on ideological abstractions rather than a people’s actual make-up and the traditions of social interaction and governing native to them.26 It seems, therefore, that Kirk, in so many ways the father of contemporary American conservatism, not only accepts Burke’s analysis but clarifies and spells it out in more detail.
Lasch’s Analysis of Burke

Lasch, on the contrary, is much less positive concerning Burke’s attachment to prejudice. Lasch’s most sustained treatment of Burke is in *The True and Only Heaven*, the last of his major works.

The immediate context of his criticism is a chapter on the sociological tradition. After analyzing the idea of *progress* and its correlate *nostalgia* in the previous two chapters, Lasch discusses the sources of this tradition and includes within his analysis not only Burke, but also the Romantic and Marxist traditions. It might surprise Kirk to see that Lasch treats Burke and Marx as if they are of the same tradition. But, as we shall see, Lasch traces a basic tenet of Marxism to Burke; not that Marx and his followers were necessarily aware that the idea came from Burke. But the idea *derives* from Burke and becomes part of the common patrimony of social thought by the time of Marx.

Lasch stresses that, for Burke, “untaught promptings of the heart” are most fundamental. What this means is obviously not uncivilized emotion but a heart rooted in the prescriptive traditions and customs of the social order, as we discussed already. Burke’s analysis of the treatment of Marie Antoinette, Lasch maintains, is an important illustration: for Burke, such treatment is unthinkable. To treat a queen as other than a queen means the loss of an entire order, as well as of the habits of the heart and attitudes which have founded the order; habits, as we saw, on which, to a large extent, even the laws depend.

Lasch mentions Burke’s comment that philosophers would use their time better to penetrate the meaning and wisdom *contained* in the tradition, rather than trying by a reason left “naked” (i.e., without tradition) to construct a new social and political order. The image of “nakedness” is quite central to Burke, since it implies the incivility and *inhumaneness* of “reason” and of all human life, without custom and tradition. The idea of “naked reason” conjures up images of something not meant to be exposed, which the “clothing” of social order with its ingrained habits is meant not just to hide, but to make *decent*. This is another side of custom and tradition. For not only is there an embedded wisdom in such social custom, but customs of civility, particularly, are given to us in order to habituate us to act as more than animals. As Burke saw it, Lasch maintains, the Enlightenment spoke of “reason” but acted on irrational impulses, both blind and impersonal. The ruthless brutality of such “Enlightened” men was a clear sign that they lived no longer behind the “decent drapery of life,” i.e., behind the drapery of civility that hides and checks the animal impulses in us, that, as it were, sublimes our animal tendencies and gives them a human form.

From the standpoint of practical politics, Burke insists on the importance of such customs and traditions, as Lasch points out, because such prejudices
are “ready to hand”: they are not half-baked inventions of “pure reason”—which boils down to the collective thought of a few, thought up in a moment—in order to deal with some crisis. Rather, they are tried and true habits, already existing and ready to hand, forming the soul prior to thought. Thus the social order is guaranteed to be stronger and more stable through the activity of custom and tradition, than through the constructs of pure reason.

Though the stress is somewhat different, much of what Lasch says is fully coherent with Kirk’s reading. To be sure, Lasch’s treatment of Burke is much more cursory than that of Kirk, since Kirk was, in many respects, an expositor of the intellectual inheritance that Burke handed on to Anglo-American thought. Still, on the basis of the texts we do have, it seems to safe to say that the interpretations of Kirk and Lasch conflict in no significant way.

However, this fact makes it all the more striking that Kirk and Lasch decidedly differ on their respective evaluations of Burke. Whereas their interpretations are largely compatible, they definitely differ on the value and depth of what Burke achieved. For Kirk, Burke remained ever the main source of conservative ideals in the Anglo-American world. For his part, Lasch may have accepted the idea that Burke was such a source, but he did not identify these ideas only with the Right (since, for example, Marx shared similar suppositions, according to Lasch) nor did he think the claims of Burke to be a wholly positive response to the disasters of the French Revolution.

**Lasch’s Criticisms of Burke**

Lasch has, as I understand him, two main criticisms of Burke. These he derives from Hannah Arendt and from Bruce James Smith, himself strongly influenced by Arendt. The objections can be summarized as follows.

Based on the analysis of Smith, Lasch suggests that one should not associate tradition so closely with custom. Tradition, according to Lasch and Smith, is bound up with memory and with political action. Far from being a source of nostalgia, tradition is a ground for remembrance and becomes a source and motive for political action in a given era. According to Smith, tradition re-awakens one to past glories and thereby renders the past a present influence, an inspiration for greatness in present and future deeds.

In contrast, custom is bound up with the social (as opposed to the political) and, more importantly, it is associated with oblivion, i.e., with the wiping out of memory. This is so, Smith maintains, because custom, rather than evoking the past in the present, gives the impression that things have not changed: it proffers the illusion of changelessness.31

Thus, in contrast to Kirk’s reading of Burke which associates custom with acquired wisdom, Lasch seems to suggest that this is exactly where tradition and custom part ways. Tradition is the inheritance of memory, whereas custom leads to forgetfulness. For Lasch, it appears, custom may indeed be a source of stability, but at the cost of political action. And this

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price is too high.

Consequently for Lasch, Burke’s insistence on custom makes him the sociologist of oblivion, one trying to lead the masses to forget their past, for the sake of social order. This is, so to speak, a “Republican” objection to Burke: Burke’s concern for forgetfulness is contrasted to Machiavelli’s Republican concern for memory, by which one awakens thoughts of past glory and the virtue such glory presumes. Though Lasch is not himself of the Republican tradition, his sympathies for the civic tradition of Populism and Communitarianism are brought to bear at this point.

The second main objection against Burke is that custom, so Lasch contends, concerns behavior not action, political action in particular. Lasch borrows an idea of Hannah Arendt here, in which action refers to deliberate activity, whereas behavior refers to what people do in a non-conscious way. This seems to imply, Lasch contends, that Burke does not see the importance of political action: he does not grasp either the significance or the need for political action, including, therefore, a political action which purposefully affects the social order. If we take politics to mean either self-governance or participatory public action—as Lasch probably would—we must infer that Burke’s conception seems to have rendered it impossible. Politics is a function of the social order and, consequently, is and should be impotent with respect to the social.

It is at this point that Lasch interprets Burke as he would interpret also the Marxist socialist: for either, politics and political action are understood as a superstructure, derived from or imposed on, the social order. After Burke, according to Lasch, the works and deeds of political action have little importance—and indeed little impact—on the underlying social structures. The priority of the social which Burke claims necessarily makes political action secondary and, even worse, impotent.

But is that necessarily a criticism? For Lasch it is, to be sure. Given his sympathies both with the Communitarian and Populist traditions, Lasch thinks political action is both irreducible and essential for human existence. Consequently, minimizing the importance of political action implicitly denies to the person something quite essential.

But a more interesting point for our purposes is this: In recognizing the progressivism of Enlightenment rationalism and politics and its threat to the social order, Burke failed to see, so Lasch would maintain, that progressivism could arise not only within an abstracted politics but from within the social order itself and thereby undermine the very customs and traditions on which Burke would found the political order. What sort of progressivism does Lasch have in mind? He had in mind the economic progressivism of the newly-minted capitalist economy. And this form of progressivism, combined with the Burkean conception of politics as a function of the social has the further consequence that politics is made to serve the excesses of modern capitalism. In other words, if the “habits, customs and prejudices” of a people can be
undermined by an economic progressivism, Burkean politics cannot resist this, but can only serve it (another parallel with Marx), since political action is necessarily a function of the social order. Thus, Lasch believes that Burke's conception of the social and political orders actually strengthened the doctrine of progress. For once radical changes happen in the underlying social structure, such as were happening in the England of Burke's time, the new wave of progressivist governing seemed to be inevitable. Let me develop this idea in a bit more detail.

Lasch, coming as he does from the Left, tends to be more sensitive than many a self-proclaimed conservative of our own time to the damage which a capitalist economy can do to the social order and, more precisely, to the persons who make up that social order. For Lasch, this is not merely a question of economic structure but is, more precisely, a question of the nature of the economic agent.

In an earlier chapter of The True and Only Heaven, Lasch offers a striking analysis of Adam Smith. On Lasch's reading, the idea of progress arises very much from Adam Smith, often thought of as the father of modern capitalism. Smith, as well as David Hume and Bernard Mandeville, were struck by the fact that rising expectations of social comfort and the new and higher standards of living were, as Lasch puts it, self-generating. As the supplies of material goods and comforts arose, so did the expectations. The expectations generated more wealth and the capacity to produce still more such goods. As a consequence, what was previously conceived of as a luxury and as something destined only for the few, became now within the possibility of the many and, indeed, no longer a luxury: often what was once a luxury became a social need.

Lasch reads this as a fundamental change of attitude from previous ages. On his reading of history—and on this I believe he is correct—both the Christian and the classical traditions held that unchecked desire is something which is both detrimental to personal happiness and dangerous to the social order. Consequently, the inherent insatiability of desire needed to be checked by laws, by the development of virtue, by public sanctions if necessary. But with Smith and Hume, Lasch maintains, "envy, pride, and ambition made human beings want more than they needed, but these "private vices" became "public virtues" by stimulating industry and invention. Thrift and self-denial, on the other hand, meant economic stagnation." Hence appetite and desire as things which can motivate economic activity are, in the end, things from which we all benefit.

Furthermore, as Lasch reads the Scottish moralists, they thought that this potential benefit, even from vice, implied that a well structured economic system could break the old cycle of rise and decline of civilization. This was because, as the Republican tradition saw it, vice was what destroyed civilizations. But now, with the help of a well ordered economy, vice could be harnessed for everyone's good. Furthermore, Smith and Hume were
perhaps overly optimistic concerning what would happen were the economic system so structured. They seem to have thought that, once one no longer had to worry about the necessities of economic life, one would work toward the cultivation of manners and civilization in oneself. (Clearly, there were no Donald Trumps in Adam Smith’s time!) It seems not to have occurred to them that in a later period, with the decline in the manners and principles of civility of which Burke would later speak, people would no longer strive for such ideals. The fact that vice would be a source of economic development would only have the effect of increasing the practice of vice and indeed enshrining vice in the law, if necessary.

This point affects Lasch’s reading of Burke. Lasch believes that much of the idea of progress derives from this conception of capitalism, articulated in Smith and favorably assessed by Hume. But it seems to follow from this that, if one grants that the economic structure is a part of the social order and that the political structure is in some sense a function of the social order; and, further, if one affirms, as Burke and Kirk seem to, not only that politics is dependent on the social but arises in large measure from the social, it seems that in a social order where economics is not just a fact, but the very stuff of the social order, politics becomes a function of economics. On Lasch’s reading, then, one gives up the devil of abstracted, utilitarian government for the devil of abstracted, utilitarian economics. Burke’s analysis may work in a relatively stable and healthy social order, where notions of upward mobility and a wholly bourgeois culture are not present. But what about in an age wherein the utilitarian and mechanistic values of capitalism come to dominate the age, as arguably is the case in our own?

One could buttress this point of Lasch by bringing in some of the thought of Max Scheler. Scheler’s thought on this topic is not easily summarized, but the long and short of it is this: the predominant ethos of the time has the tendency to form the patterns of thinking and acting for the people of that age. This is not a necessary but is a powerful tendency. If an age exists, therefore, where “capitalism” refers not mere to a market or business economy, but refers to an ethos, to what John Paul II has called (in Centesimus Annus) the culture of capitalism, then it seems that the social underpinnings of a healthy political order must be lost.

This is so because the logic and modes of thinking proper to a capitalist culture are not those of the healthy order praised by Burke (and by Kirk). Burke’s idea of custom presupposes not just that, factually, there are customs, but presupposes also an order of people for whom virtues such as loyalty, love of family, friend and country, regard both for the moral law and the social sensibilities of a people are well-grounded. But if, as I say, what begins as a purely economic structure—the market economy—becomes an ethos, then the utilitarian laws and values of that ethos come to predominate the way people live and think. And the laws and values of capitalism are ever such that they need to be restrained by and contextualized in the values of loyalty.
and love, by the moral law and by social mores. Utilitarian and mechanistic forms of reasoning will always be at odds with any kind of reasoning—whether moral, aesthetic or other—which concerns itself with intrinsic values. Utilitarian values, though essentially lower than moral values, will tend to be stronger than they, because they appeal to the tendency toward immediate gratification which is our common patrimony since the Fall of Adam. Thus, on Lasch’s analysis, Burke favored a social order over a political one because he thought that would counteract the utilitarian and mechanistic values of French Enlightenment politics; but he seems never to have thought that the very utilitarian and mechanistic values he fought against would find their home in the social order into which he put so much trust. And thus he failed to see that the progressivism he rightly abhorred could be found just as much within the social order as in the political, thanks to the rise of capitalism.

Is it a significant fact that Burke himself seems not to have understood this destruction through economics in his own time? In *The Conservative Mind* Kirk writes of Burke:

...it is one of the few charges that can be preferred successfully against Burke’s prescience...that he seems to have ignored economic influences spelling death for the eighteenth-century milieu quite so surely as the *Social Contract* repudiated the eighteenth-century mind. He was thoroughly acquainted with the science of political economy... But what is one to say about Burke’s silence upon the decay of British rural society?... Even while Burke was defending the stolidity of cattle under the English oaks, wholesale enclosures, the source of much of the Whig magnate’s power, were decimating the body of yeomen, cotters, rural dwellers of every humble description; as the free peasantry shrank in numbers, the political influence of landowners was certain to dwindle.39

It seems Burke did not see the progressivist capitalist’s writing on the wall.

If this second criticism is correct, the soundness of the social order is not something one can take for granted. While it might be true that the English commoner of Burke’s time had such virtues that their sensibilities could stem the destructive tide of modern capitalism, it seems no longer so. At issue here is not the question of the “freedom of the market”, but rather what happens to an underlying social order if the utilitarian, capitalist values are not contextualized in a deeper system of loves and virtues. Without the latter, the social order is no buttress against dangers to the polity from capitalist economics. Rather, the combined power of market capitalism (including mass advertising), governmental support (e.g., corporate welfare), and the high degree of economic dependency on the part of those not a part of the economic or political elite, tends to transform the social order into an order mirroring the values of the market. Thus the social order, far from resisting the logic of capitalism, becomes a function of it.

And how different is the logic of the board rooms of General Motors
Resolution?

I said at the beginning of this essay that I wanted to undertake a dialectical exercise: I wanted to place Kirk’s and Lasch’s evaluations of Burke’s analysis of prejudice in dialogue. Though both seem to analyze Burke in similar terms, Kirk seems to favor Burke’s analyses whereas Lasch proffers two important criticisms. Is there a way to bring these two points of view together?

Custom and Tradition, Virtue and Prejudice

We saw that Lasch criticized the idea of custom in Burke. Lasch believes that an emphasis on custom leads to forgetfulness, to oblivion and, implicitly, to the impossibility of civic virtue.

It seems that Lasch is correct here: custom can easily lead to oblivion. If the deeds I perform become customary, this can lead to a level of unconsciousness and even forgetfulness of the meaning of the acts one performs. This is present whenever we do things from routine, as custom seems here to be understood. Moreover, the customary also tends to produce an illusion, namely, that what one does and believes has always been done and believed, and in this fashion. Precisely the uncritical, unquestioning character of custom makes it a poor basis for political action. Indeed, one might strengthen this point by saying that, in the long run, though there will be a kind of stability in the social order based on custom, in the end, the stability itself will be illusory, since once other ideas challenge the customs of those who live according to them, the sense of their permanence could well disappear.

But it seems we need more subtlety here. First, while this point certainly has merit, it does not seem that oblivion is something which necessarily arises from custom. In fact, it is not obviously the case that just because something is done habitually, just because “one need not think about it,” that it necessarily loses its character as a deliberate act. The Republican tradition above all should see this point, because of its concern with virtue. Virtue, when it is deeply rooted in a person, is something which one becomes so habituated to that one is, in a sense, no longer conscious of it: one is so formed by virtue that one no longer needs to deliberate.

But so it is with custom. Custom is habitual, to be sure; and to that extent, it is not “conscious”, in the manner, say, of one meditating on the great deeds of past heroes. But if the habitual character of custom necessarily devalues it from the standpoint of personal achievement, it seems that Republican virtue must suffer the same fate as social custom: it must lose its value the more it becomes actual virtue. But would anyone of the Republican tradition or still less the Communitarian or Populist traditions want to argue that?

Furthermore, while it is true, I think, that one wants carefully to
distinguish between tradition, understood as collective memory, and custom as a force which functions with or without memory, it would not follow from this that custom has no important role for social and political life. Quite the contrary; the point that they are distinct shows that, ideally, they have different functions, not that custom is a bad thing just because it is not tradition! Thus it seems to me that the distinction adds a good deal of clarity to this discussion and indeed corrects a tendency which is present in Kirk’s analysis, the tendency to see tradition and custom as being basically the same thing. On the other hand, it does not seem to me to be a weakness in either Burke or Kirk that they think both tradition and custom have their appropriate place in the social order. What is necessary is that we understand the difference of their function and be clear that the function of one cannot be taken up by the other.41

Implicit, perhaps, in such “Republican” criticisms is a misunderstanding of human agency and freedom. It is sometimes assumed that unless something is an actual choice, one is not “really” free in acting. Now it must be understood that not every case of their being a “lack of choice” is indicative of a lack of freedom or, still less, a lack of agency. A truly virtuous person, for example, a person who has embodied virtue to a very high degree does not make choices with regard to those virtues. If I am generous, I have not lost my agency just because generosity has so permeated my nature that I no longer think of the option not to be generous. That is not a mark of lacking agency: it is the fulfillment of agency, it is what agency is supposed to be.

But what is true of virtue can—in a lesser way, to be sure, but can—be true of custom. Suppose that everyday I made sure that I was the first to get up so I could make coffee for my wife and bring it to her in bed. And suppose that through constant effort and habit, it was second nature to me: why would that custom make me less an agent? Do I need to be in conflict to be an agent? Do I need to be in doubt and deliberation to be an agent? I think not. And in fact, I think I show just how much I value doing this service to my wife that I do it well without having to think about it all the time. It is precisely the aim of the custom that one learn to do it well so that one can concentrate on the value of it. Indeed, if I were always worrying about whether or not I did the act well, I would no longer be concentrating on my wife, for whom I am performing the service. And I believe the same can be said of custom in general.

But perhaps Lasch failed to appreciate the different points of view under which this same problematic—that of custom—can be looked at. Among Burke’s concerns were the social order and its peace. In the Burkean tradition, one must recall that order is more important than achievement, unlike the Republican tradition. But if Burke’s concern is order, he does not really have reason to bring up the question of virtue anyway. The point here is that, for Burke, since the concern is social order, he points out the
importance of custom because that is something which really will hold the social order together. And this is the case, whether or not custom helps the citizens develop virtue. But this need not mean that Burke does not care about virtue; it could just as well be that he is concerned about order and consequently does not speak about virtue.42

This interpretation of Burke could, in fact, be buttressed by the criticisms Lasch derives from Arendt. After all, if custom is concerned only with behavior and behavior is only a part of the social order and not part of the political order which demands virtue, why should Burke concern himself with virtue in his development of custom? In fact, there seems an implicit confusion in Lasch’s critique. For if Lasch is correct, Burke would be wrong to confuse custom with virtue. But by Burke’s speaking of custom, why assume he really means to speak of virtue, especially since he hardly brings up the question at all? Hence Lasch seems, at one and the same time, to be criticizing Burke for not making the distinction. Also, on Lasch’s analysis, since Burke was concerned basically with the social order and not the activity of politicians, he had no reason to bring up political virtue or therefore to make the distinction at all!

At the same time, I think it needs be said that Burke does at times speak as if order is his only concern. If that were the case, it could suggest that Burke would tend to substitute custom for virtue or, more precisely, custom for the good of the people of the nation. If that were his intent, Lasch would be correct in suspecting utilitarian reasoning in Burke, i.e., the using of custom and its concomitant forgetfulness, just for the sake of order and peace.43 I can certainly grant that there are formulations which might suggest this, though I am inclined to attribute that more to Burke’s turn of the phrase, than to anything else.

The Problem of Progressivism in the Social Order

The more serious objection which we find in Lasch concerns the connection Burke suggests between the social and political order. What happens, then, when a social order becomes corrupted from within, as Lasch suggests was happening in Burke’s own day and has become even worse now?

I must admit that, to my mind, this is a powerful objection, rendered ever more powerful by ascendancy of the mass media, by the growth in corporate capitalism, by the effect of advertising and the way it seems to render every product a consumer need. In Burke’s day, I suspect there were no tools quite so efficient in undermining the very prejudices Burke thought should lie at the foundation of the social and political order as are available now. In support of Lasch’s reading, I must say that I think that the practical utilitarianism of capitalism definitely does undermine the basic laws of a sound social order and thus tends to render the social and political order subject to the values of mechanism and utility.
On the other hand, I would not say that this point shows the falsity of Burke’s assertion. It would not follow from the fact that the social order can be corrupted and that, therefore, the political one can be corrupted because of the social order, that the relation between the social and political orders is different from what Burke suggests: rather, this could just as well buttress Burke’s point. For one could say that the social order, being corrupt, corrupts the political order. But what is certainly true is that a philosophy of prejudice seems insufficient to deal with the peculiar power of the market. The market seems to have such power that it can undermine healthy prejudices, through advertising, through developing a culture of consumerism, and all the correlating vices which can be sold. And the more the ethos of utility and mechanism predominates, the more the deeper values of loyalty and love will be undermined.

Lasch’s point based on economic progressivism is, I believe, quite convincing. Perhaps the only way to save the social order is to parry the thrust of a market whose logic and momentum is much too powerful. How do we do this? Because Lasch does not accept that the political order is a function of the socio-economic order, he suggests that the revival of the Communitarian and Populist traditions--with their emphasis on grass roots politics, participation in local community life, family businesses, and so forth--could serve to counter the dominance of the economic sphere by awakening in people the abilities and virtues required by self-governance.

Even though Lasch’s solution does imply a different relation between the social and economic spheres than that of Burke, it could rightly be understood as a Burkean point. For in attempting to deal with this problem, Lasch turns to the traditions and customs native to this country, to find resources with which to deal with this problem. When he turned from the Liberal and Socialist traditions, he moved not to the contemporary Right, but to the Populist tradition. With the advent of wage labor as a common mode of life in the late 19th century, Populism became an important part of the discussions among politicians and thinkers. The Populist tradition emphasized that in order to guarantee genuine freedom, a republic which aims at real political participation and economic opportunity, the older ideal of the family business and family farm are the best means. Wage labor means dependency, whereas small businesses and farms means autonomy and local participation, with at least the possibility of expressing genuine interests in the political realm. Here, Lasch, like Burke, looked to an older tradition in order to find values expressed in that life and to reawaken the sense of life of the time.

We may question whether Lasch’s proposal is viable. Lasch himself notes that the Populist tradition has no economic or social philosophy. And further, he questions whether it has the inner power to counteract the capitalist ethos without persons and communities willing to take on the virtues of self-denial and who are willing to live with less. A century ago, this
was possible. But what is possible now?

What does seem of interest, however, in Lasch’s criticism is that his solution is precisely to change the underpinning social order through Populist and Communitarian ideas. This would be insufficient, of course, since actual political and economic changes would be necessary. Lasch shows greater perspicuity than Burke or Kirk, I think, in understanding the interrelation of social, political and economic spheres. On the other hand, it seems plausible to read him in such a way that the changes he is looking for are changes which would make the political and economic spheres expressions of the underlying social order, i.e., of values, ethos, aspirations which the people of the given community have. One cannot help but wonder: are the convictions of Lasch, on the one hand, and Burke (and Kirk), on the other, really so different as Lasch himself believes?

Notes

1. My thanks to ACES and to Annette Kirk, who made it possible for me to do the research for this paper at the Russell Kirk Center, in the summer of 1997. Thanks also to ISI for inviting me to speak on this topic at the 1997 summer conference on Edmund Burke, also at the Russell Kirk Center.

2. This normativity is partially bound up with the constructive character of scientific reason. Thus because reason was understood to look at nature as something it could command and control by means of thought, it was both essentially progressive (i.e., finding ever better ways of expressing nature) and at the same time not framed in dogmatic or quasi-dogmatic style, as in theology or contemporary philosophy. As Cassirer writes: “Reason understands this structure [of nature] because it can reproduce it in its totality and in the ordered sequence of its individual elements. Only in this twofold movement an the concept of reason be fully characterized, namely, as a concept of agency, not of being.” He continues: “This conviction gains a foothold in the most varied fields of eighteenth century culture. Lessing’s famous saying that the real power of reason is to be found not in the possession but in the acquisition of truth has its parallels everywhere in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century.” See Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 14. This text is still the best general introduction to the philosophical ethos of Eighteenth century thought.

3. Cassirer, in contrast, believes Enlightenment thinkers did achieve a coherence with respect to these two ideals. See The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 15-6.

4. Still, we must understand this individualistic conception of reason with sufficient subtlety. For though it is individualistic, it is also universalistic. Though these notions might seem opposed, in fact universalism of this sort is quite consistent with individualism. For universalism implies that any individual can come to same knowledge as another, if he or she thinks about it carefully enough. Hence, the universalism is not like that one might discern in Medieval philosophy, a sort of universalism founded on the idea that things have “general” natures. Rather, this universalism is based on the idea that all Enlightened individuals will see things the same way. The universality of reason was affirmed, but not because of the intelligibility of being, nor of the universality of human nature, but because of the universal nature of Enlightenment. This was a feature not only of the conception of reason in the Enlightenment but also of its conception of politics. Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 18-9.
5. In the *Reflections*, Burke hammers away at the contempt for prejudice and the customs which found it in the French Revolutionists and their intellectual allies. For example: “It is no wonder, therefore, that, with these ideas of everything in their Constitution and government at home, either in Church or State, as illegitimate and usurped, or at best as a vain mockery, they look abroad with an eager and passionate enthusiasm. Whilst they are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a Constitution whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience and an increasing public strength and notional prosperity. They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men,” *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (Washington DC: Regnery, 1963), 542-3.

6. Canavan gives a somewhat more thorough analysis of prejudice. See his *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960), 73-80. A comprehensive analysis would have also to investigate the connections and contrasts between Burke’s notion of prejudice and various notions both of common sense and of moral sentiments, ideas common to the thought of Great Britain in the 18th century.


8. One could derive from some of Burke’s ideas here a critique of Foundationalism — something perhaps necessary to any critique of the Enlightenment. For it is clear that, for Burke, the fact that something is present in tradition and/or custom gives it some presumption of truth (or, at least, of practical wisdom), though not a knowledge based on “objective foundations”, in the usual, Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment sense.

9. Burke counted among prejudices the ways a people have typically been governed, the natural social interaction on the part of different classes and, most importantly of all, the religion native to a people. Needless to say, there is nothing abstract in these ideals: they are eminently concrete. Also, as is obvious, these “prejudices” are among the most important ideals for a given people.

10. “Principle is right reason expressed in permanent form; abstraction is its corruption,” *The Conservative Mind*, 40.

11. Perhaps the extreme case of what Burke was opposing was found in Hobbes. “For the attainment of a real science of the state nothing else is necessary than to carry over into the field of politics the synthetic and analytic method which Galileo applies in physics,” Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 255.

12. A more thorough analysis of this point would have to take into account Burke’s aesthetics. This has been achieved in large measure in the chapter on Burke in Bruce James Smith’s *Politics and Remembrance* (1985), where Smith analyzes some of these political notions in terms of Burke’s ideas of the beautiful and the sublime.

13. “You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feelings: that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree; and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that the stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves the general bank and capital of nations and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, (and they seldom fail,) they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to case away the coat of prejudice and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of read application in the emergency; it previously
engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit, and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature, Reflections, 558-9.

14. “Your literary men, and your politicians, and so do the whole clan of the enlightened among us, essentially differ in these points. They have no respect for the wisdom of others, but they pay it off by a full measure of confidence in their own. With them it is a sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things, because it is an old one. As to the new, the are in no sort of fear with regard to the duration of a building urn up in haste; because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery,” Reflections, 559.

15. “The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wised at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any scion alien to the nature of the original plant. All the reformatons we have hitherto made have proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity….,” Reflections, 527-8.

16. “But the most remarkable thing about ordinary reason in its practical concern is that it may have as much hope as any philosopher of hitting the mark. In fact, it is almost more certain to do so than the philosopher, because he has no principle which the common understanding lack, while his judgment is easily confused by a mass of irrelevant considerations, so that is easily turns aside from the correct way,” Kant Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Lewis White Beck, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1959), 21.

17. Kirk The Conservative Mind, 42
18. The Conservative Mind, 43.
19. I develop the idea that tradition plays a positive role for knowledge and justification in my “Knowledge and the Western intellectual tradition”, forthcoming.
21. I mean by this that the argument is basically practical: for if something is held to be true or good by many generations, that gives it some presumption of insight and wisdom. At the same time, there is a definitely mystico-religious dimension to this aspect of Burke’s thought, of a sort that only a deeply religious and sensitive soul could experience: “As the ends of such a partnership [i.e., social order] cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher nature, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact, sanctions by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place…” Quoted in The Conservative Mind, 17. Also: “The reason first why we do admire those things which are ancientest, is because the one are the least distant for the infinite substance, the other from the infinite continuance, of God.” This sentence, from Hooker, was often on Burke’s lips. Quoted in The Conservative Mind, 37.
23. “Through the same plan of a conformity to Nature in our artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of her unerring and powerful instincts to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived several other, and those no small benefits, from considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance. Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost inevitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first acquirers of any distinction. By this means our liberty becomes a noble
freedom. It carries an imposing and majestic aspect. It has a pedigree and illustrating ancestors... All your sophisters cannot produce anything better adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than the course that we have pursued, who have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our rights and privileges,” Reflections, 529-30.

24. For example, True and Only Heaven, 134.


26. “The moment you abate anything from the full rights of men each to govern himself, and suffer any artificial, positive limitation upon those rights, from that moment the whole organization of government becomes a consideration of convenience. This it is which makes the constitution of a state, and the due distribution of its powers, a matter of the most delicate and complicated skill. It requires a deep knowledge of human nature and human necessities, and of the things which facilitate or obstruct the various ends which are to be pursued by the mechanism of civil institutions. The state is to have recruits to its strength and remedies to its distempers. What is the use of discussing the man’s abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and physician rather than the professor of metaphysics,” Reflections, 545.

27. That is, chapters two and three.

28. “Little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon [Marie Antoinette] in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor, and of cavaliers! I 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. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom! The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touches, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness!” Reflections, 550.

29. “Among the revolutions in France must be reckoned a considerable revolution in their ideas of politeness. In England we are said to learn manners at second-hand from your side of the water, and that we dress our behavior in the frippery of France, If so, we are still in the old cut, and have not so far conformed to the new Parisian mode of good breeding as to think it quite the most refined strain of delicate complement (whether in condolence or congratulation) to say, to the most humiliated creature that crawls upon the earth, that great public benefits are derived from the murder of his servants, the attempted assassination of himself and his wife, and the mortification, disgrace, and degradation that he has personally suffered,” Reflections, 549.

30. That Burke’s position on this is not a pure conventionalism is made clear by one of Lasch’s main sources, namely, Bruce James Smith’s Politics and Remembrance. Smith gives a certain stress to the idea that Burke’s politics is rooted in his aesthetics. For Burke, power is sublime, something which evokes – and ought to evoke – fear. In order that one not be exposed to the awful (almost numinous) sense of the sublime, it must needs be clothed in the beautiful. Custom, political traditions, and the like clothe the sublime in the beautiful and rather than inspiring fear, they inspire love and devotion. These ideas are, for Burke, also connected to the masculine (the sublime) and the feminine (the beautiful). This also partially explains Burke’s horror at the treatment of Marie Antoinette. For example: “All the pleasing illusions [e.g., the Queenship and its accompanying social requirements by both queen and subjects] which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire

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of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the hart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded, as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion,” Reflections, 551.

31. Lasch comments, “. . . we should see Burke not as a traditionalist, strictly speaking, but as the sociologist of oblivion. [Bruce James] Smith contrasts him with Machiavelli, whose political thought originated precisely in a fear of oblivion, according to Smith. Machiavelli preferred a republic to a hereditary monarchy because it inspired men with a longing to be remembered for their glorious actions. Memory conferred a vicarious immortality on those who achieved ‘worldly honor,’ as Machiavelli put it. In Smith’s words, ‘through remembrance, the deed could acquire a permanence denied to the doer . . . Without the glorious deed and its foundation in political memory, men would no longer attempt the ‘rare and unparalleled thing.’ Machiavelli spoke of ‘customs’ in connection with hereditary regimes, of ‘recollections’ in connection with republics.” True and Only Heaven, 131-2.

32. True and Only Heaven, 134-5.
33. See chapter 2, 52-8.
34. In fact, Lasch entitles the section “Adam Smith’s Rehabilitation of Desire”.
35. True and Only Heaven, 53

36. Naturally, Smith’s and Hume’s convictions are only one species of a broader genus. In fact it was generally assumed among Enlightenment thinkers that a re-organization of social life would produce this general benefit for everyone, though this re-organization was not always conceived of in purely economic terms. “All political and social enterprise must stand on the same foundation, and a renaissance of political and moral life can be expected only from the growth and spread of intellectual and social culture,” Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 269.

37. Here too is the pronounced optimism with respect to social re-organization: it seems that, as a matter of course, if we were simply to re-organize social life, the natural progress of the species would be an inevitable consequence. Diderot held basically the same position, though not stressing economic alteration of the social order. See Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 268.

40. This seems to be the ideal of Smith in Politics and Remembrance.
41. More subtlety is needed here. So, for example, certain native customs are such that they play liturgical or quasi-liturgical functions, i.e., they awaken memory. On the other hand, some events celebrated as part of a tradition, such as remembrance of the deeds of the Founders on Independence Day seem not to be the sort of memory meant to inspire similar deeds, but precisely to give us the sense that we have retained those earlier ideals, something not easy to defend on historical grounds. Thus it seems to me that, though the opposition of custom and tradition includes an important point, its importance must not be exaggerated nor the opposition it expresses be taken as more definitive than it is.

42. It should be noted that the rhetorical emphasis with which Burke makes his case for custom and prejudice has at times led his commentators to think that he cares nothing for politics, except as a force for staid order. This interpretation seems implicit in James’s Politics and Remembrance. Burke, however, most certainly held to the importance of a progressive principle in politics. (By way of example, see Reflections, 522). But the progressive principle
was—obviously—not at issue here, but the corresponding conservative principle. Burke seems to have believed that both principles were necessary, but the contemporary stress on the progressive principle required his impassioned defense of the conservative principle.

43. This is how I read Lasch’s criticism of Burke, though it should be noted that Lasch does not say this explicitly. Compare *True and Only Heaven*, 131-2.

44. Lasch traces the development of his own thought in chapter one of *The True and Only Heaven*. 