

Revolution: A Reader

Edmund Burke is not only skeptical about the light that reveals “the rights of man” to the French, he is convinced there are no such rights. Rights must be negotiated among men. In England that begins with the Magna Carta and the Petition of Right. These are fabricated agreements, not natural rights, for no rights are natural. Burke’s skepticism makes a curious echo with Jean Genet’s understanding of the mutually negotiated roots of authority and subjection. For both, politics is a man-made theater, all the way down. No natural givens underlie the script, only what men can do to and with one another. In Genet this artifice feels liberatory, a kind of collaborative project of self-definition. In Burke it is simply scolding.

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