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REACTIONARY THINKING:

WHAT IS ITS IMPACT IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS?

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Reactionary Thinking:

What Is Its Impact In Contemporary Politics?

Richard Shorten

The impact of reactionary thinking on contemporary politics is rhetorical. This does not mean the impact is minimal or slight; an act put on merely for show; surface-level rather than deep; or easily to be dislodged. Reactionary rhetoric is a powerful means of persuasion – extending to self-persuasion. Meanwhile, reactionary rhetoric is also what holds together a powerful ideological tradition; one capable of re-invention to suit changing historical eras (and ‘for us’, a tradition lately proving easily adaptable to the demands of the digital age), but a tradition in politics always appearing, notwithstanding the adaptation, with an underlying core.

THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF REACTIONARY THINKING: PERSUASION IS THE KEY

Struck, like many, by the ferocity of a right-wing turn circa 2016, but particularly struck, as a historian of political ideas, by the limpness of the dominant sense-making endeavours in the political media, I set out five years ago on a Leverhulme Trust funded research project to locate the new ‘hard right’ scene within what I hoped would become a more *liberated* historical perspective. This was the kind of perspective which I thought was lacking. Why did I think this perspective was (and is) lacking? Trump and Brexit, together within upturns in polling for right-wing political parties in general, could not be explained, I thought, by a broadly psychological approach that was being succumbed to in liberal journalism. Right-wing voters were not ‘mad, bad or stupid’. That was a fallacy being clung to, in part, for false comfort. Rather, such voters they had their *own kinds* of internal dialogues. And most likely, those dialogues were responsive to the messages such people found around them. In other words, persuasion was key.

Neither could the new political scene be explained, I thought, by the remnants of Marxist approaches. Not that the new forms of right-wing identitarian politics lacked all

identifiers by social class; they were, after all, often so vivid in their workerist ethos. Rather, it seemed to me that understanding simply necessitated setting aside once and for all any echo of arguments by ‘false consciousness’ or, similarly, by elite manipulation. The less privileged in society were not simply discounting their material well-being in preference for what the emerging, semi-apologetic jargon soft-pedalled as ‘culture’ over ‘economics’. Instead, the less privileged were sometimes the new reaction’s noisiest backers, the most inclined of all groups to express strong anger in political protest and advocacy. (To be sure, Trump and Brexiteers were not serving the material interests of the poor. But unreservedly, social interests were not being slyly distorted in political speech and discussion. They were fierce clues for inferring that there were genuine convictions in play).

Lastly, from within academia – and from the immediate profession I work within – there was limpness in explanation since the ground from which to *make* the explanation required was less ill-prepared than left wholly unfertilised. Political theorists – and especially, political philosophers – tend to be trained to think *from* units of belief that comprise, principally, ‘concept’ and ‘argument’. But such a currency often works to constrain, not liberate, the imagination. Beliefs that conflict within one another drop out of being of interest, for failing a consistency test. Arguments are narrowly conceived, and their analysis tends to ignore, for instance, the weight of premises for particular audiences in particular settings. The consequences of this constrained imagination proved predictable. Political philosophers were geared up to reach only a single conclusion about right-wing discourse: namely, that since in this discourse no coherent webs of beliefs were to be found, and, specifically, beliefs both observable in the behaviour of concepts and sustained by arguments of sufficient logical credibility– nothing of intellectual substance existed *per se*. However, argument and concept are not the sole units of belief for thinking from. And so, as far as the alleged absence of substance in right-wing reactionary belief is concerned, thinking from the viewpoint of rhetoric can suggest otherwise.

In fact, one limitation of all three of these most touted explanations is to collude – for varying reasons – in the notion of ‘populism’. Populism became all-purpose for papering over each perspective’s faults: for philosophers, it could mean the coarseness of ordinary belief; for mainstream journalists (forgetting its ‘stop-gap’ quality), it registered the shock of diversion from conventional parliamentarism, but not much more than that; and for residual

Marxists, it meant an oppositional politics that was misdirected yet which held out the prospect of a unity of the oppressed being formed in the face of adversaries, if only it could be re-shaped.

“POPULISM”: LUMPING TOGETHER DISPARATE PHENOMENA

‘Populism’ became foremost in the limp discourse. It was prevalent source of the reference points gathered, the unyielding site of the analogies. It gave tone to judgments, which ranged from the hyperbole of some ultra-leftists to the typically defensive nonchalance of so-called social conservatives in reply. And, most of all, from the viewpoint of a historically-cum-culturally informed political science, it gave disguise to the lumping together of disparate – not identical – hard-right-ish phenomena. The category is not empty. But surveying the scene from the end of the decade of the 2010s, it could be apparent, alternatively, that populism amounted to no more than *one of a series* of modes of reactionary politics that were conspicuous for mobilising contemporaneously. This series was essentially as follows: ‘national populism’; the ‘alt-right’; neo-fascism; and traditionalism. (The adjectival qualifier national is important: the history of nationalism gave many more clues about the identity of the first of these modes than was given time to by all the hype about populism.)

My own project, to the contrary, resolved to take the right-wing imagination seriously: to give emphasis to *lived* ideas; and to give due consideration to the past as much as the present. Fundamentally, I resolved to *read* right-wing texts; albeit with a radar, too, to the more worldly features of the production and consumption of texts (ghost-writers, campaign demands, genre conventions, etc. etc.). I decided to read a wide collection of texts in the first instance; thereafter, to whittle a collection down into a sample; and then to read that sample closely. Afterwards, with less premediated intention, and struck rather by what I discovered, I proceeded to draw out the substance that was discernible into emerging patterns; and also, to nudge the analysis along via regular insights indebted to authors in classical rhetorical theory, or else to the occasional humourist, novelist, or nonconforming cultural commentator. The outcome, my book [*The Ideology of Political Reactionaries*](#), does its best to re-enact this reading process. Periodically, it reviews the main, generalisable findings, ending in an integration of those findings together in the new ideological theory of reactionary politics. The conclusion is as follows.

From the upheaval of the Great Recession of 2008, the imposition of harsh austerity policies following it, the example of success in right-wing insurgency by Trump and Brexit, and (since the close of decade of the 2010s) the filtering through of the implications – economic and otherwise – of both the Coronavirus crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the political scene has been up for grabs. Actors – whether politicians or voters; leaders or supporters; outsiders or insiders – have cut across ideological positions and demographic constituencies much more than is usual. This movement, this fluidity, has gone in all sorts of directions: reaction-ism is not reductive to innate tendencies of groups. But a special movement – of belief, not social types (and evidenced in recurring pattern) – has been the exit of moderate conservatives into hard, non-‘soft’, reactionary ideological territory. There *is* a fault-line between conservatism and reaction-ism: commentators from the Marxist and post-Marxist left are wrong to deny the existence of one. But this fault-line is inherently shaky, and the appetite for breaching it has become of the prime afflictions of contemporary politics. (Even if this were overstated things, the movement would still merit accenting: shibboleths about conservative ownership of the idea of ‘responsibility’ close the exploration down.)

Units of belief that rhetoric provides theorising with are numerous: ‘invention’, ‘arrangement’, ‘style’, ‘memory’, ‘delivery’, and beyond. See Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* for what remains an authoritative guide to analytic vocabulary and procedure. The units that most serve the theory I offer in *The Ideology of Political Reactionaries* are, first, ‘style’ (sometimes treated, even by rhetoricians, more lightly in significance than it should, indicatively, as ornamentation); and, second, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, which are categories for the ‘invention’ of persuasive cases a speaker may put before an audience (or more simply, are categories of appeal that in orientation are, respectively, reason-based, character-based, and emotional). The drift of moderate conservatives into ideological positions that are, variously, alt-right, neo-fascist, national populist, or traditionalist, is (my research findings suggest) facilitated especially by ‘style’. Spokespersons for reactionary politics appropriate and emulate some particular discernible styles; people who are persuaded then mimic those styles; and, hence, the persuaded people go on to reproduce the styles in ever increasing circles, via communication within and across their own immediate social contacts.

THE QUESTION OF STYLE: REMOVING INHIBITIONS

Reactionary rhetorical styles themselves are principally threefold. First is *camp*: kitsch and transgressive; usually manifest in non-serious, taboo-busting expression; and often flouting the expectation of decorum in political expression – but for precisely that reason, removing inhibitions within such expanding, right-wing communities of belief. Reactionary camp corresponds to the sense within political belief that nothing is off-limits – an idea radically at odds with any fabled conservative ideal of ‘responsibility’. Going back in time, Joseph McCarthy is an example: by elected platform and office, a US Republican, but one who can be found greasing the plausibility of wild conspiracy claims by techniques of gossip, inuendo and a gambler’s logic. On a review of McCarthy’s speeches and writings, a gambler’s logic is especially eye-catching. (Estimating exact numbers of communists in US public administration is not, by admission, an exact science; and when challenged on accuracy by liberals and moderates, the numbers can be repeatedly guessed at without sanction.)

Second is *bombast*: orotund and brash; usually manifest in self-referential, self-aggrandizing – often autobiographical – expression; and flouting an expectation of humility on the part of the political actors when they are addressing the public. But repeatedly, this quality of bombast – of, at best, cheapened ‘charisma’ – seems to prove sympathetic, possibly for being something like trance-inducing. That is the lesson of historical texts. On an extreme case in point, *Mein Kampf* is riddled with praise of sacrifice – which is predicable when praising a nation’s capacities. Only, on inspection, this praise is predominantly not of a German people’s sacrifice (war, economic ruin, misdirection by liberal and socialist politicians), but of Hitler’s own (poison gas in the trenches, surrender of artistic vocation, compromises in private life). No special charm; no canny awareness of what an audience might demand symbolically of a leader. Ergo, no charisma.

Brutalism is the third archetypal reactionary style. This can be summarized as being ugly and jarring, and manifest most in expression that is truncated or rhythmically-unbalanced. What it would seem foremost to flout is any expectation of eloquence. But in place of eloquence, the offer to the hearer or reader is the conferral of urgency on a public issue. Often, a key consequence is to inure the receptive party’s ethical sensitivity in the course of accepting fabricated pressure to ‘get things done’. So, Trump in his [campaign text](#) of 2015: ‘We don’t have time to waste on being politically correct’.

In contemporary politics, these reactionary styles leave their mark not only in written texts or leaders' orchestrated speeches. They leave it also in chat forums, blog spots, novels and film, even body language. A liberated perspective involves an attentive eye or ear to pick these clues up. The 'manosphere', for instance, can at times appear as nothing *other* than hard-right camp, by virtue of rituals of group membership that raise earnestness – anti-racism, anti-sexism – into the gravest possible sin. (And viewed in this light, online toxic masculinity needs to be worried about in formal arenas of political debate far more than it normally is.) Literary fiction, also, should not be free from scrutiny for complicity, and, specifically, in reactionary brutality.

Thus, insightful commentators have connected the stripped-back prose, deadpan narration and vacant emotional interiors of the novels of Michel Houellebecq to the rise in political popularity of the traditionalist reactionary, Éric Zemmour. (And so far, without receiving decisive refutation to the contrary.) Boris Johnson – who did not begin his political career as reactionary – but who veered in that direction whilst in prime ministerial office (and from out of starting position roughly of moderate conservatism) carried his bombast, which UK commentators too often mistook for roguishness or simple extroversion, into the performance of leadership in a visual dimension. Bravado and bluster – expressed, in an extended way, in floundering deportment and partial dishevelment – became variants on Trump's bragging.

Styles cement 'pillars' in reactionary ideology and rhetoric. Styles and pillars co-produce this 'core' of the reactionary political tradition which I have described, a tradition that, in alternative to the perspective 'populism' affords, connects up past and present in the history of right-wing political ideas, and also spills over geographic space. The pillars are the prime substance of the common pool of ideas. In the mechanics of reactionary ideology, their appearance – and in tandem – constitutes the necessary condition for reactionary mobilizations (while, in practice, the combination of styles as *per* reactionary mode can prove more *ad hoc* and optional). These parts are again threefold. In a functional sense, they correspond to three special stimuli to human persuasion by language-use. Reactionary *logos* is decadence; reactionary *pathos* is indignation; reactionary *ethos* is conspiracy.

REACTIONARY LOGOS, PATHOS, AND ETHOS

A rhetoric of *decadence* dramatizes radical decline. It persuades by appeal to reasoning, in the sense that an overall story of radical decline serves as a kind of diagnostic framing device. There is a common pattern to the composition of reactionary texts, which is like so: symptoms observed; causes diagnosed; prognosis delivered. The pattern is illustrated perfectly by the writings of Éric Zemmour, the high-performing, outsider candidate in the French presidential election of Spring 2022. Zemmour's 500-page tome of 2014, *Le Suicide Français*, observes wide-ranging symptoms of French national decline (from sport to economics); diagnoses causes (in feminism and decolonialism, chiefly); and prognoses a terminal end-state. But the causal explanation is, really, an illusion. The reader who is persuaded is giving in to a narrative fallacy: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* ('after this, because of this').

A rhetoric of *indignation* validates emotional experience for a right-wing community of belief. Feelings are confirmed by virtue of being shared. Reactionary texts begin, typically, in anger – for indignation is anger with a particular texture (simmering, unspent rage; much more moralized than material envy alone). But the texts can often squawk along. So, by the end, the emotions set off have formed an arc: anger gets augmented by other negative emotions – like disgust, like hatred – before dissolving, lastly, into the emotional flatness of exhaustion. The simmering quality is omnipresent. Consider here the exemplary tropes of 'betrayal' and 'coddling'. Reactionary citizens hear that they have been betrayed – their long-kept loyalty has been abused; while their adversaries (or else those people their adversaries protect) have been coddled – the prolonged indulgence of the undeserving.

A rhetoric of *conspiracy* reveals, for persuaded parties, processes of hidden deception. But meanwhile, conspiracy rhetoric is also an action by which a reactionary speaker makes an appeal to their character, in an aspect that is not often caught by commentators. The speaker foregrounds *their* whistleblowing: their active ownership of suppressed information about a third agent – the accused – which, in the relevant utterances, they now take to an audience. Trust is what is at issue principally, while evidential truth is only at issue secondarily (although the typical utterances *do* nevertheless make a fetish of the facts – something which the 'post-truth' appendage to the populism thesis neglects). Reputation and credibility operate, in the last analysis, by virtuous circle: the personality of a speaker certifies the existence of a conspiracy, and then in turn the ability to mount an accusation of conspiracy is what certifies

the speaker's personality. Nigel Farage, the reactionary leader in contemporary Britain who loomed largest before Johnson, was master of this art in prose and speech. Farage put it to adaptable use in the service of the reactionary ideology of Brexit-ism. His UKIP campaign text of 2015, *The Purple Revolution*, articulates *ethos* that conjoins, in friction, 'outsider' jocularly, flippancy, and abrasiveness and insider-at-court expertise and wisdom. Time and time again, the text emphasises that Farage *knows* how both 'the EU' and 'the political class' work, because in earlier incarnations he himself worked in both the financial sector of London, then in Brussels and Strasbourg.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

What is to be done? A kinder rhetorical public culture – ergo, ultimately, a kinder politics – will not spring from nowhere. The current tide of reactionary politics will not ebb without response. What may be required is more focused discussion-about-discussion (as unpromising as this sounds). But vitally, it is regular people who will need to hold discussions of this sort, and in everyday terms. Academic political theorists bail out of helping with the discussion required when they balk at languages of politics that address particular reasons to particular audiences. There are some exceptions (like enthusiasts for deliberative democracy), but even those theorists cling to a dry and technical language which forestalls the imaginative understanding required. Not that, at the other extreme, 'pure' rhetoricians will serve as the soundest guides. Eloquence is not at issue. Curiosity about human behaviour within broad bonds of communication *is*.

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