Introduction from Amazon Book Review on Corey Robin's The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump

Late in life, William F. Buckley made a confession to Corey Robin. Capitalism is "boring," said the founding father of the American right. "Devoting your life to it," as conservatives do, "is horrifying if only because it's so repetitious. It's like sex." With this unlikely conversation began Robin's decade-long foray into the conservative mind. What is conservatism, and what's truly at stake for its proponents? If capitalism bores them, what excites them?

In The Reactionary Mind, Robin traces conservatism back to its roots in the reaction against the French Revolution. He argues that the right was inspired, and is still united, by its hostility to emancipating the lower orders. Some conservatives endorse the free market; others oppose it. Some criticize the state; others celebrate it. Underlying these differences is the impulse to defend power and privilege against movements demanding freedom and equality -- while simultaneously making populist appeals to the masses. Despite their opposition to these movements, conservatives favor a dynamic conception of politics and society -- one that involves self-transformation, violence, and war. They are also highly adaptive to new challenges and circumstances. This partiality to violence and capacity for reinvention have been critical to their success.

Written by a highly-regarded, keen observer of the contemporary political scene, The Reactionary Mind ranges widely, from Edmund Burke to Antonin Scalia and Donald Trump, and from John C. Calhoun to Ayn Rand. It advances the notion that all right-wing ideologies, from the eighteenth century through today, are improvisations on a theme: the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back. When its first edition appeared in 2011, The Reactionary Mind set off a fierce debate. It has since been acclaimed as "the book that predicted Trump" (New Yorker) and "one of the more influential political works of the last decade" (Washington Monthly). Now updated to include Trump's election and his first one hundred days in office, The Reactionary Mind is more relevant than ever.

Understanding the 'Reactionary Mind' in the Age of Trump

Corey Robin is clear: modern conservatism is a reactionary project, rooted in the opposition to the liberation of men and women from control of the powerful.

By Paul Rosenberg / Salon November 19, 2017, 11:40 AM GMT

Conservative intellectuals have led the way in denouncing Donald Trump as not a "true conservative." Perhaps the most powerful rebuttal comes from the heavily revised second edition of political scientist Corey Robin's book "The Reactionary Mind," on whose cover Trump replaces Sarah Palin in the subtitle, "Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump." But that's only the most glaring misconception this remarkable book lays to rest.

Another fundamental misconception is about the very nature of left and right:

> Though it is often claimed that the left stands for equality while the right stands for freedom, this notion misstates the actual disagreement between right and left. Historically, the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders, and constraint for the lower orders.

And that lays the foundation for Robin's main thesis — based on conservatives' own words — that modern conservatism is a reactionary project, rooted in "the opposition to the liberation of men and women from the fetters of their superiors, particularly in the private sphere." For example, Robin notes:

> "The real object" of the French Revolution, [Edmund] Burke told Parliament in 1700, is "to break all those connections natural and civil that regulate and hold together the community by a chain of subordination: to raise soldiers against their officers; servants against their masters; tradesmen against their customers; artificers against their employers; tenants against the landlord; curates against their bishops; and children against their parents."

Even before Burke, Thomas Hobbes was the first counterrevolutionary, Robin argues: "Rather than reject the revolutionary argument, he absorbed and transformed it. From its deepest categories and idioms, he derived an uncompromising defense of the most hidebound form of rule." For Hobbes, divine right or any other appeal to traditional authority no longer cut it. He took the same intractable calls for liberty that threatened the old order to its core, and used them as his foundation to justify absolute rule. Of course, he redefined "liberty" in the process — as conservatives often do — but that's just how they roll.

Because the old order is seen as incapable of defending itself as it is, conservatives like Burke (himself an outsider with no inherited standing) have made themselves masters of learning from those who challenge power from below. Sometimes that involves tearing things down, in order to preserve the essence of hierarchy itself:

> Far from yielding a knee-jerk defense of an unchanging old regime, or a thoughtful traditionalism, the reactionary imperative presses conservatism in two different directions: first, to critique and reconfiguration of the old regime; and second, to an absorption of the ideas and tactics of the very revolution or reform it opposes. What conservatism seeks to accomplish through that reconfiguration of the old and absorption of the new is to make privilege popular, to transform a tottering old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses.

Making privilege popular can take on a wide variety of different forms, Robin explains:

> Sometimes, conservatism has multiplied the ranks of privilege, creating ever-finer gradations between the worse off and that were worst off. Here the model is the American firm, with its many tiers of middle and lower management. Sometimes, conservatism has simplified those ranks into two: the white race and the black race of the white supremacist imagination. Sometimes, it has offshored society's inequalities, seeing in the people of an imperial state a unified rank of superiors, "a kind of nobility among nations" subjugating less civilized people abroad. And sometimes it has turned elites into the victims, encouraging the masses to see their abjection reflected in the higher misery of those above them. Regardless of the means, conservatism has always found a way to conscript the lower orders into a regime of lordly rule.

Like the book as a whole, this list is partial and suggestive, rather than exhaustive, a jumping off point for further exploration. There are hybrids, for example: Corporate hierarchies can coexist with sharp binary divides between “productive members of society” and the “undeserving poor.” Or loss of privilege can be recast as victimhood — “Christians” losing their “religious freedom” to discriminate — and thus, via martyrdom, as grounds for reclaiming privilege on a new footing. The same logic can be deployed against the “tyranny” of evolution, global warming or any science at all that offends some conservative faction.

If the core of Robin’s argument remains unchanged from the first edition, the explication and implications are not. The new edition brings much deeper scrutiny to the economic side of conservatism, which Burke himself helped initiate (more on this below), including illustrations of internal tensions and ambiguities similar to those seen in Trump, who is the subject of the book's concluding chapter. Trump's contradictions and confusions may be more extreme, more outlandish, than those of most other prominent figures who have come before him, but they are not without precedent, as conservative

intellectuals would like to pretend.

If Trump seems like a poor champion for the conservative cause, a good reason for that, Robin argues, is that the right is less credibly challenged than it was in times past. "Trump is a window into the dissolution of the conservative whole, a whole that is dissolving because its victories have been so great, a whole that can allow itself to collapse, because it has achieved so much."

In this sense, Robin's account challenges progressives as well. There have been recent progressive movements, he acknowledges, but they haven't cohered to the point of scaring conservatives the way that Hobbes, Burke, Nietzsche, Hayek and even Antonin Scalia were scared by earlier movements. “While there are stirrings on the left — Occupy, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ movements and the Sanders campaign — none of these movements has yet achieved sufficient velocity or institutional traction to awaken and discipline a new right that would be able to do what its predecessors did.”

There is, in fact, a more fundamental failing Robin exposes on the left, from the squishiest center to the farthest extremes: a failure to take conservatism seriously as a powerful movement of ideas. This failing is not universal. For example, George Lakoff has long argued that conservatism self-consciously expresses a powerful, coherent, hierarchical, metaphorically grounded worldview; but Lakoff’s arguments have largely failed to penetrate into elite discourse, because they call into question a faith in disembodied Enlightenment rationalism.

Robin casts a different light on this liberal failing, as well as conservative success. Reaction is not a thoughtless process, he argues — as many on the left and right both have long assumed. Conservatives may not like the sound of it, since “it threatens the purity and profundity of conservative ideas,” and since “the word ‘reaction’ connotes an unthinking, lowly grab for power.”

But that’s not what Robin has in mind, given his close reading of conservative thinkers. “Reaction is not a reflex,” he writes. “It begins from a position of principle — that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule over others — and then recalibrates that principle in light of a democratic challenge from below.”

The question of who is fit and why may shift, sometimes dramatically, but the position of principle remains, along with the recalibration project. Together, these give the conservative intellectual tradition far more heft, continuity and significance than is commonly recognized, either on the left or the right. It’s no easy task, since the very fact that the old order is challenged brings its fitness into question. More fundamentally, Robin writes, “The conservative faces an additional hurdle: how to defend the principle of rule in a world where nothing is solid, always in flux? From the moment conservatism came onto the scene, it had to contend with the decline of ancient and medieval ideas of an orderly universe, in which permanent hierarchies of power reflected the internal structure of the cosmos.”

Edmund Burke's role in initiating the conservative economic tradition is one of the key treasures of the second edition. "The fact that values were now understood to have been made rather than given, focused men and women on the activity of making more generally, on the act of bringing things into the world," which naturally gave prominence to the role of labor, as even Burke acknowledged. This is where Adam Smith's labor theory of value (later taken up by Karl Marx) came from.

Late in life, however, Burke was one of the first to put forth a different view. "In 'Thoughts on Scarcity' Burke argues that there is no value to a commodity apart from its price at market. The price is a product of a mutual agreement between buyer and seller," and thus the market itself "does the work of creating harmony out of dissonance, settlement from conflict."

But that's not where Burke ultimately leaves things, as hierarchy once again enters the picture as his argument unfolds. "It is no longer the market settling price but the man of capital determining value, whether he's buying or selling, whether the commodity is labor or money." At the same time, Burke argues, "labor is commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand" of the buyer of labor. Thus, the worker's wage needn't even be enough to live on, but, as Burke insists, "There is an implied contract … that the labor, so far as that labor is concerned, shall be sufficient to pay to the employer a profit on his capital, and the compensation for his risk."

Far from being an ancient, forgotten text, this reads like a primer in how to understand GOP economics, at least from Reagan onwards. It's also a vivid example of how "the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders, and constraint for the lower orders." Robin doesn't work this out in detail — as I said before, his book is suggestive, rather than exhaustive. But the fact that Burke made this argument when he did throws a completely different light on more recent developments, from the pre-New Deal "Treasury view" that the Great Depression would and should end when businessmen's confidence said it should, to Donald Trump's assertion that his wealth fluctuates according to his mood.

In addition to these sorts of suggestions, there are others that cross over into different kinds of intellectual endeavors. Robin's explanation of conservatism sheds a whole new light on the work of political scientists. His account helps provide a deeper explanation for why — as Grossman and Hopkins argue in "Asymmetric Politics" (Salon review – https://www.salon.com/2016/08/30/asymmetric-politics-a-deep-dive-into-the-mysterious-puzzle-of-americas-political-divide/), the Republican Party is driven by conservatism as an ideological movement, in contrast to the Democratic Party, which they describe as a coalition of interest groups. In turn, the fragmented nature of that coalition helps provide a partial explanation for the weakness of the left Robin notes. That's not to equate either party with left or right entirely -- the messy world of party politics never works like that. But it does provide some insight into what's been going on for the last 50 years or so of American party politics.

Another realm Robin's work connects to is political psychology. "[R]eaders of Burke's earlier work on aesthetics, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,' will know that beauty, for Burke, is never a sign of the power's vitality; it is always a sign of decadence. Beauty arouses pleasure, which gives way to indifference or leads to a total dissolution of self." Burke himself wrote, "Our most salutary and beautiful institutions yield nothing but dust and smut." Later, Robin notes, "Burke develops a view of the self desperately in need of negative stimuli of the sort provided by pain and danger, which Burke associates with the sublime."

Burke takes his own aesthetic instincts to be universal truths, but they actually read more like a gloss on the inner world of Hervey Cleckley's subjects in his pathbreaking book on psychopathy, "The Mask of Sanity." Cleckley's subjects were criminal inmates, clinical extremes, and I'm not suggesting that Burke was actually one of their number, only that he reflected some key aspects of their psychology.

Cleckley found his subjects lacking in a normal human core, which he identified both as conscience, and as any sort of normal response to the sorts of things that interest and concern most people. Only extremes tended to register with them. Cleckley found that deeply disturbing, if not alarming. Burke takes it to be the human condition — if not immediately, then at least, over time.

Robin also briefly touches on Ayn Rand's infatuation with psychopaths, which I've written about before in relationship to conservative GOP politics. Clinical cases are extremes, but a decade of research using subclinical scales has yielded considerable insight into the complex known as the "dark triad" — psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism. In turn, the dark triad has been shown to correlate with social dominance orientation, a straightforward measure of preference for group dominance that's also correlated with political conservatism.

None of this proves anything more than tendencies and correlations, which is why Robin's work based on close readings of classic conservative texts remains singularly important. Almost without exception, he is not imputing anything to conservatives that they have not said about themselves. But the clearer he manages to make the nature of conservatism, the more he makes it possible for other approaches to shed even further light, ask better questions and open more fruitful lines of inquiry. It's why he deserves to be read carefully by people in multiple related fields. What's more, the better we understand conservatism, and its preservation and popularization of privilege, the better we may understand ourselves, and what we stand for in opposing it.

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