

The Reactionary's Guide to the 21st Century

by Bradford Tuckfield (November 2016)



For better or worse, there is plenty of labelling in American politics. All major politicians align themselves broadly with Left or Right by labelling themselves either liberal or conservative. Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton had an argument earlier this year about which of them most deserved the label “progressive,” and which most deserved to be called “liberal.” Others label themselves or their friends or enemies as socialists, libertarians, social justice warriors, traditionalists, pro-market, pro-choice, pro-life, anarchists, nationalists, feminists, revolutionaries, Marxists, Trotskyists, objectivists, atheists, hedonists, idealists (the most common excuse for lacking pragmatism), pragmatists (the most common excuse for lacking ideals), or egoists (the most commonly correct of all labels of politicians). Most of these labels are used as both praise and abuse at different times, depending on the source and target. One label that is underutilized, and almost always a term of abuse and insult on both Left and Right, is “reactionary.”

This essay is intended to provide something I have never seen before: a positive introduction to reactionary thought. It will also suggest some ways that reactionary thought can have a salutary impact on the American political

landscape. Reactionary thought often seems absurd or at least peculiar. However, we face an always-peculiar and often-absurd political situation in America today, and I believe that a little dose of responsible reactionary thinking could be just the right antidote to many of our current ills.

The 21st century guide to reactionaries

Giving a precise definition of political reaction is not as easy as it may sound. For an interesting and fairly thorough scholarly treatment of reactionary thought, albeit a negative one, I suggest Mark Lilla's book *The Shipwrecked Mind*. Lilla outlines some history of reactionary thought going back to the French Revolution, and writes about a few influential intellectuals with reactionary tendencies.

I offer this simple definition: a reactionary is one who wishes to reject some features of modern life and embrace some features of life as it was in past times and places.

Another way to define a reactionary is as a converse or counterpart to a revolutionary. The revolutionary and the reactionary share a strong dissatisfaction with contemporary life. The difference is the remedy proposed for improving the world: the revolutionary wishes to push the world *forward* into a better future, while the reactionary primarily looks *backwards*, wishing to restore some better parts of the past. Quite often the reactionary is interested in the distant rather than the immediate past.

Reactionaries are often lumped together with conservatives, as if reactionary thought were "extreme conservatism" or a distant but logical extension of moderate conservative ideas. The distinction between reactionaries and conservatives can be discerned through Willam F. Buckley, Jr.'s image of conservatism as "standing athwart history, yelling Stop." If the reactionary were standing athwart history, he would be yelling "Turn Around." The progressive would be yelling "Keep Going" and the revolutionary would be yelling "Go Faster."

Mark Lilla calls Buckley's *National Review* a reactionary publication, though most (including Buckley and its editors today) use the conservative label and do not call themselves reactionaries. One reason for the confusion is that

“conservative” is a common, readily understood and recognized political label, while “reactionary” is not, so thinkers and pundits sometimes apply the conservative label to reactionary ideas for the sake of being more widely understood. The semantic and historical issues involved with drawing a line between conservative ideas and reactionary ideas that are mistakenly called conservative is beyond the scope of this essay, which will focus only on reactionary thought.

An important caveat

My abstract definition of reactionary thought leaves some important things out, including which features of modern life the reactionary rejects and which features of the past he wishes to embrace. This omission was intentional, since political reaction is not dogmatic or centrally organized, and each person is free to choose for himself exactly which reactionary opinions he will adopt, if any. Unfortunately, the common usage of the reactionary label today only carries with it ugly connotations. Principally, reactionaries are today associated with racism (e.g. a desire to restore segregationist policies), misogyny (e.g. a desire to allow husbands to beat their wives), or a few peculiar anachronistic ideas such as monarchism. There is no need to be coy about the proper attitude towards racism and misogyny: they are repugnant and have no place in a respectable political philosophy.

It is important to point out that racism and misogyny are neither identical with reaction, nor are they inextricably linked to it, nor are they necessary attitudes for even the most committed and serious reactionary thinker. Racism and misogyny, to the extent that they are features of the past, are not the only features of the past, and there is much else there for a broad-minded reactionary to embrace. In the remainder of the essay, I will outline several reactionary ideas that have none of the repugnance of the racism and misogyny commonly associated with reactionaries today. I will advocate for serious and committed reactionary thought that is free of such repugnant notions.

Exemplary reactionaries

The best examples of reactionaries in modern America are the Amish. For centuries they have steadfastly chosen to reject the technological advances, secularism, and social change that have rolled through the rest of the country.

They have been successful not only in their reactionary efforts to reject the modern world, but (more importantly) in their larger goal of creating a thriving and healthy society. Consider: the Amish suicide rate is less than half of the rate in the general population of America – one indication that they are happy. Cancer incidence is low because of their traditional healthy lifestyles. The recorded incidence of personal violence is extremely low. Their population has boomed for decades with only negligible immigration into their community, since nearly all young Amish adults choose to be baptized into their community rather than abandon it when they have the choice. Their economy is stable and scalable and not sensitive to recessions. Their society is egalitarian, and each person wears similar clothes and drives similar buggies.

One of the greatest reactionary successes of the Amish has been their rejection of the federal safety net. By filling out IRS Form 4029, the Amish can declare their religious beliefs and be exempted from Social Security and Medicare taxes in exchange for waiving those benefits. This exemption has been encoded in US law for decades, after lawmakers assented that the Amish were able to provide a reliable social safety net independent of the federal one.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the magnitude of this success. Social Security and Medicare (and Medicaid and other federal healthcare programs) are enormous, inefficient, bloated programs with serious budget problems. Like all taxes, they lead to distortions of markets and productivity losses. One could fill pages with other problems associated with them, not least of which is that arguing about them consumes a great deal of our time and attention. The Amish, through their strategy of reactionary rejection, have eliminated these problems from their lives. More importantly, they – a society that numbers in the hundreds of thousands – are able to care for each and every one of their own in cases of poverty and medical need.

Recently, the chair of council at the British Medical Association proudly described the NHS (Britain's medical safety net) as "one of the greatest achievements of civilization." Other leaders and commentators throughout the West have said similar things in praise of their own country's mandatory federal safety nets. These government safety nets that are so widely praised are almost always as bloated, inefficient, and problematic as Social Security and Medicare here in America. I believe that the Amish have accomplished something even more impressive than the Medicare or Social Security or the NHS – not needing them.

Caring for a neighbor or a family member is morally better and more rewarding than paying a tax to an impersonal and coercive government “charity.” The Amish here have had a great and largely unsung reactionary success.

A final point about the Amish, hardly worth mentioning because it is so obvious, is that they are certainly not a “hate group” as the reactionary label may tend to imply in today’s political climate. The story of the West Nickel Mines school shooting from 10 years ago shows the Amish sincere religious impulse at its best: immediately after the horrifying murder of innocent Amish schoolchildren, relatives and community leaders were willing to quickly and completely forgive the murderer. They, the best examples of reactionaries in America today, are nothing like the swastika-drawing, hate-filled internet trolls that are now popularly associated with the reactionary label. By examining the Amish as an ideal example of reactionaries, we can do away with all of the common negative stereotypes of reactionaries, including the racism and sexism I mentioned above, as well as the militant political advocacy that Lilla associates with reactionaries in his book.

Other reactionary heroes

There are other exemplary reactionaries in America and around the world. James C. Scott, in a remarkable book called *The Art of Not Being Governed*, describes the hill tribes inhabiting huge area in Asia that historian Willem van Schendel called “Zomia.” These hill tribes lead simple and technologically primitive lives, largely separate from the modern and modernizing states that surround them. Scott says that they are not primitives who have simply not yet caught on to modern technology and social structures. Rather, they are “runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, [forced] labor, epidemics, and warfare.” In other words, Scott claims that these tribes have not simply been left behind by our advancing civilizations, but have made a conscious and reactionary choice to flee from it and keep themselves unsullied by it. When Scott describes the downsides of modern civilization that these tribes are fleeing – “slavery, conscription, taxes, [forced] labor, epidemics, and warfare” – one can immediately see the motivation for being a reactionary.

Reactionary choices are not confined to hill tribes and the Amish. These groups

represent an extreme end of the spectrum of reactionary possibilities. On a more modest scale, many mainstream people have made small reactionary choices in their otherwise modern lives. If you know anyone under age 40 who does not have a Facebook account, you are a witness to a small act of reactionary rebellion. As I write this, news has just surfaced that the head coach of the New England Patriots football team has rejected the usage of tablet PC's during football games, and has returned to the use of paper and pen. A few news outlets today regularly cover gossip about Britain's royal family – a reactionary subject if there ever was one. The internet search engine DuckDuckGo, a site that offers the reactionary ability to avoid state and corporate surveillance, reports consistently improving traffic (about 12 million visitors per day the last time I checked).

In our secular age, every seriously religious person has made a kind of reactionary choice. Though Pope Francis is widely known for his apparently liberal and progressive statements, he has many moments that are purely reactionary. His criticisms of capitalism, for example, have been celebrated on the Left because advocacy of free markets and capitalist systems has become strongly associated with modern conservatives and especially with the Republican party. However, I read many of his criticisms not as attacks on the Right, but as reactionary attacks on modernity itself and implicit advocacy for a pre-modern economy (maybe one that resembles the economy of the Amish or the Zomian hill tribes). Other religious leaders today, including prominent Mormon and Jewish leaders, have also made reactionary statements about the modern world.

Many true reactionaries have chosen to reject one prominent feature of modern life: the ubiquitous pursuit of fame. The Amish do not have robust PR departments or teams focused on self-promotion, so we do not often hear about their reactionary successes. The hill tribes of Zomia are not bragging about their avoidance of the modern world or articulating reactionary theories in scholarly journals or the popular press. So, the heroes of the reactionary world are largely unsung. Anyone who wishes to smear the reactionary label or (more commonly) ignore reactionary ideas in favor of unthinking progressive unanimity faces little resistance. This essay provides a little resistance from an instinctive reactionary who is nevertheless a full-fledged member of the modern world.

The reactionary's joys

The reactionary attitude is popularly associated with curmudgeons and mirthless and fearful pessimists, but actually it can be a source of joy, and compatible with a cheerful temperament and a happy life.

One source of happiness for a reactionary is the radical openness of his worldview. Today's political conversations are so often bogged down in minor and frankly boring details. For example, politicians might spend months debating a question like: should Social Security taxes go up by half a percent or a whole percent? It is doubtful that anyone would describe this debate as particularly enjoyable. The reactionary's imagination, by contrast, is free to think of much more interesting solutions, for example of being like the Amish, and abolishing federal Social Security altogether, or finding some other creative solution in some other society of the distant past. The reactionary's creativity and imaginative capacities could be their own reward as he avoids getting bogged down in very boring conventional debates.

Bobby Kennedy, a hero of the Left, is reputed to have claimed that he didn't focus on things as they were, but rather as they could be. The modern Left's agenda, in stark contrast to Kennedy's sentiment, is drearily focused on things as they are. We have a welfare system, and the Left pushes not for a change, but simply for more of it exactly as it is. We have widespread affirmative action, and the Left again pushes not for a change, but simply for more of it exactly as it is. Every time a social change begins to take place, the Left simply pushes for more of it, not creating ideas but merely shuffling old ones along and asking for more of what we already have. How boring! How much more exciting it is to be a reactionary and reach into far off times and places for inspiration as to how we could make significant, not to mention creative, improvements to our lives and societies. How much more interesting to think outside the constricting box of modern life exactly as we have inherited it.

Related to the joy of openness, the reactionary experiences the joy of historical learning and understanding. Learning about the past is enjoyable, and it can be its own reward regardless of any political advantage it might confer. Since the reactionary instinctively desires to replace the broken parts of the present with the best parts of the past, he is compelled to learn more about the past and is therefore immersed in the happy task of historical learning. When he learns more history and rejects bits of the modern world, he feels a kinship with his near and distant ancestors, whose life and habits he emulates a little.

He feels more of the social connection that Edmund Burke described between the living, the dead, and the unborn.

Since the reactionary does not have an emotional commitment to the modern world, he is free to take a step back from it and laugh a little at its absurdity. Even the staunchest anti-reactionary must admit that our modern world is filled with absurdity. Modern nations have enormous wealth, but this wealth exists alongside unprecedented debt. We claim to love freedom and liberty, but most of us allow someone to tell us where to be and what to wear and do between 9 and 5 on every weekday. People obsess about their diets and assiduously ensure that “junk food” doesn’t enter their bodies, but have no compunction about filling their minds with junk, by watching trashy TV shows or pornography, or by wasting away in front of computer or phone screens that present only spectral distractions. Our enormous expenditures on schools have not brought us greater wisdom, and often it is clear they have brought us very little education at all – and yet the solution that is mostly commonly proposed to our schools’ problems is to spend even more money. If you look for absurdity in our modern world, you will find it.

A mainstream conservative or liberal will be frustrated when he encounters the many absurd aspects of our modern world. A reactionary, who on some level views himself as a stranger wandering in a strange modern land, can laugh at this absurdity rather than cry over it. Having disowned the modern world, he need not suffer greatly from its ills.

Living in this century

Though the reactionary naturally feels a desire to escape from the modern world, he will probably remain in it; most of us do not join hill tribes or cut off ties with the modern families and communities that we were born into. Rather than escaping from modernism, a civic-minded reactionary can focus on improving it.

Since reactionary thought is not dogmatic or centrally organized, there is no one fixed path toward making positive reactionary changes to the modern world. One reactionary idea mentioned above was the obviation of federal Social Security and healthcare, achieved already by the Amish and perhaps not impossible for dedicated reactionaries in the rest of America. Related to this

possibility is the possibility of reducing or eliminating other federal programs that are bloated and unnecessary or harmful – the farm subsidy program comes to mind as one such program, as does the extensive federal meddling in the housing market.

Shrinking federal government is not the only possible goal for the reactionary. There are plenty of other negative developments in the modern world that one might want to roll back. For example, radical individualism, often lauded by politicians on Left and Right today, has brought its share of pathologies along with its purported benefits. Singapore, a modern and highly Westernized society, tempers its individualist leanings with social policies intended to strengthen family ties. Its Maintenance of Parents Act allows elderly parents living in poverty to make legal claims on their children for monetary support.

Singapore's Maintenance of Parents Act is an abridgement of individual economic freedom, but one that Singapore has judged worthwhile for the sake of pushing families to care for each other. The instinct to promote family ties at the expense of individualism is a pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment-individualism instinct – in other words, a reactionary instinct, though Singapore's highly modern government probably wouldn't admit it. American reactionaries could consider supporting policies like Singapore's promoting family interdependence as a way to improve the modern world.

Another possible avenue for reactionary activism is to fight the worst excesses of our consumer society. Corporations collect huge amounts of personal data on each of us in order to push invasive advertisements on us. Anti-surveillance activism is reactionary inasmuch as it fights this recent development of the modern world. Organizations like Adbusters that try to fight invasive advertisements are typically associated with the American Left, and mostly for good reason. However, even a pro-market conservative like this author can like the free market but dislike obnoxious and ubiquitous ads that demand our attention and take precious time from our lives. A serious reactionary could do much good fighting for our society to become less crassly consumerist and less overrun by obnoxious advertisements.

These are only a few examples of how a committed reactionary could live in this century, but fight to roll back some of the worst developments of recent times. Without needing to flee the world and join a tribe on a remote mountain

somewhere, a reactionary could be politically active in the modern world as a normal citizen, fighting to shrink the federal welfare apparatus, to enact social policies promoting family togetherness, to eliminate the negative aspects of consumerism, or to improve the world in any number of other ways. These battles need not be “tragicomic” or “quixotic” as Mark Lilla describes reactionary activism. In fact, if reactionaries are committed, these battles could even be won.

Going forwards and backwards

Implicit in the name and messaging of progressives is the idea that they are advocating and generating progress, defined as a movement forward toward something better. For a faithful progressive, this is a redundant definition, since for them going forward is the same as going towards something better. The reactionary believes that we have taken some wrong turns, and going “forward” in the sense of going in the same direction we’re currently headed will not take us to a better place. The reactionary wants to go backwards in time, but still towards something better than what we have today. But advocacy of going backwards in time does not make political reaction a backwards ideology or an ideology opposed to progress. How could the restoration of something better be anything other than progress? Couldn’t a backwards movement through time be a forward movement for our political culture?

Of course it depends on what parts of the past are being restored. Much of the early use of the reactionary label in politics was around the time of the French Revolution, when the revolutionaries wanted to push society “forward” and the reactionaries wanted to restore the monarchy and things as they were before. The revolutionaries won the literal war as well as the war of ideas, and ever since reactionaries have been sneered at as out-of-touch, self-aggrandizing, bigoted, or worse. Even today, when people talk about reactionary thought, they often associate it with advocacy of monarchy and aristocracy because of this connection.

But the past does not only consist of monarchies and aristocracies. To be a reactionary is to reject some of the present in favor of some of the past. Some reactionaries may want to restore the French royal family to power. (As much as it pains me to say it, I think that ship may have finally sailed). Other reactionaries, however, may want to restore a much different past: the simple,

pious, and egalitarian life of Swiss farming communities of several centuries ago (the past that the Amish have successfully emulated, without resorting to monarchy or aristocracy). Others may be motivated to restore, for example, the artistic culture of past centuries that produced much greater art and architecture than our day. Reactionary art programs exist today that teach and advocate for representational painting in older styles – though I do not believe that any of these programs call themselves reactionary. There are yahoos and troublemakers who want to restore a racially segregationist past or an imagined misogynistic world. They are repugnant and perhaps the best thing to do is to ignore them. The point is that reactionary thought can be constructive and creative, life-affirming and positive, if we carefully choose the right elements of the past to admire and emulate.

The 2016 presidential election in the United States has laid bare some serious problems with our modern world. Democrats and Republicans will disagree with each other about what exactly these problems are, but most Americans think that something is dreadfully wrong. More of the reactionary attitude could be just what is needed today. According to the reactionary mindset, we do not need to live with the evil around us, compromise with it, or concede our integrity to it. We can unequivocally reject the parts of the modern world that we find unacceptable. After this rejection, we can turn to humanity's huge and diverse past to find its ideal elements to recreate and restore. The strange and wondrous truth is that rejecting the modern world may be the only way to save it.

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