

Why bad books matter

Shorten, Richard

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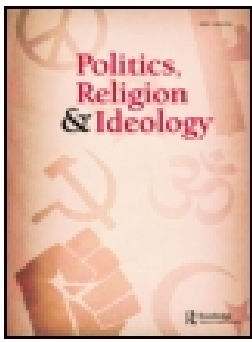
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Richard Shorten

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Why Bad Books Matter: Past and Future Directions for Understanding Reactionary Ideology

Richard Shorten

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

A useful tool for learning more about the ways in which the hard Right communicates and integrates is the reactionary *diatribe*. This is significant in a political context where the hard Right not only is experiencing success, but the default categories of interpretation and criticism can lack bite. A fresh direction for research would link present politics back to historical practice but channel contemporary methods for rhetorical study, picking out reactionary writings as a stable object for inquiry. Therefore, this article (1) revises the category of reaction by re-picturing it as a 'second-order' ideology encompassing all those right-wingers professing to stand on the 'wrong side of History'; (2) draws lessons from some defects of 'populism' theories; (3) places a methodological proposal in relation to earlier theories of reaction, which are confounded most of all by reactionary contradictoriness – a feature that rhetorical analysis is far better able to accommodate, inasmuch as messy, chaotic, sometimes ugly communication is grist to its mill. Lastly, (4) the diatribe model itself is described (key properties being digression, repetition and point-dwelling), and then laid out as groundwork for further, in-depth inquiry. In the meantime, an important truth surfaces: bad books matter.

Introduction

Trump's America, Brexit Britain, and the rise of radical anti-immigration parties in mainland Europe should call political scientists to want to (re)engage seriously and closely with theories of the political Right. Within a general literature on politics, theories of reaction are few and far between.¹ Even fewer such theories are addressed specifically to the recent occurrences.² Yet, if reformulated according to an adequate framework, I argue that a theory of political reaction may hold significant interpretive, and also critical, force. For

CONTACT Richard Shorten  r.c.shorten@bham.ac.uk  Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

¹For the exceptions, see esp. Albert O Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991); Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter King, *Reaction: Against the Modern World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2012); Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2016).

²Heinrich Geiselberger (ed) *The Great Regression* (London: Polity, 2017); Andrew Sullivan, 'The Reactionary Temptation', *New York Magazine*, 30 April 2017.

scholars and publics alike, therefore, reaction may merit greater attention than it is currently allotted.

In this article, I attempt to show four things. First, after setting aside some basic definitional qualms about reaction, I make a case for recognizing reaction as an ideology. Second, I try to establish the value which reaction may have against other theories of the Right – particularly, as against ‘populism’. Third, I reflect upon why it is that the extant theories of reaction itself largely fail, proposing that they take ineffectual units of analysis. Fourth, in place the extant theories, I suggest how the use of rhetoric may prove enlightening, stating a rationale for looking closely at reactionary political writings and for undertaking qualitative text analysis on a particular format: the model of the reactionary *diatribe*. Participation in the diatribe format is the explanation for why reactionaries write bad books. Potentially, exposing the recurrence of the format will generate many more interpretive and critical insights. Therefore, I submit, bad books should matter.

The spirit of the article is exploratory. By the end, the aim is to have justified a method for a future research direction, and not yet to have achieved a fully-fledged theory.³ The suggestion is that what would be beneficial to the understanding of political reactionaries is a more substantial piece of research applying that method to a broad range of historical and contemporary cases. An addendum to the final part of the article does briefly sketch four case studies, albeit for limited ends: to illustrate; to vindicate the criticisms made of populism. Nevertheless, even rapid treatment of these cases suggests one finding, which concerns the dividing line that may only weakly separate reactionaries from conservatives. That this line appears blurry – and intrinsically so – is significant in view of disagreement between extant commentators about whether the division is fairly fixed (Mark Lilla) or actually absent (Corey Robin).⁴ The diatribe is a clumsy model of expression and, commensurately, the early empirical evidence is that right-wing texts frequently slip-up: emitting a reactionary message sometimes, but also switching repeatedly into relative moderation.

From misconceived definitions to second-order ideology

Reaction is an intuitive term. Indeed, that is one of the key motivations for turning to it. However, coming to be looked upon more carefully, political reaction is far from easy to define.⁵ Misconceptions abound, obscuring its potential usage from the off. Most destructive, perhaps, are two of the regular misconceptions: first, that reaction is simply a ‘binary’ term (and a binary term alone); second, that it is a ‘relational’ term.

As a binary, ‘progress’ is reaction’s fairly standard polar opposite.⁶ Alternatively, ‘revolution’ can comprise the opposite, although the revolutionary/ reactionary pairing is not particularly *du jour*. Regarding the reaction/ progress pairing, studies in etymology are informative about its enduring nature, roughly since the eighteenth century.⁷ At a

³This article is part of a larger project on political reactionaries funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship. The arguments arising are set out in monograph form in *The Ideology of Political Reactionaries* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming). For an initial consideration of the issues, see Richard Shorten, ‘Reactionary Rhetoric Reconsidered’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 20:2 (2015), pp. 179–200.

⁴Mark Lilla, ‘Republicans for Revolution’, *New York Review of Books*, 59:1 (2012), p. 14; Robin, op. cit.

⁵Philology is an emphasis in James Alexander, ‘Reaction in Politics’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (forthcoming).

⁶E.g. Lisa Nandy, ‘Caroline Lucas and Chris Bowers’ in *The Alternative: Towards a New Progressive Politics* (London: Biteback, 2015).

⁷Jean Starobinski, *Action and Reaction: The Life and Adventures of a Couple*, transl. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2003).

workaday level, however, the inference derived from such is crude. ‘Reaction’ is reinforced as just a category of default: one who is a political reactionary is one who *isn’t* a ‘progressive’. The consequence is that in sharp contrast to progressivism,⁸ reaction forfeits investigation in its own right. And hence, relative neglect of the category has followed.

The relational understanding is already a feature of the first misconception. But it has a specific deficiency, which goes one stage deeper. When reaction is a binary, it at least gets *some* content of its own (even if that content is inscribed as an afterthought). But when reaction is relational, nothing is there to be recognized as identifying content at all. Whatever may give the illusion of such is merely a mark of specific distance from another category. Consider, for example, the allegation that there can be ‘reactionaries of the Left’. That is interesting not only because it is false (which I am inclined to think it is), but because it shows how the contest not only between political opponents, but also notional allies, can detract from constructive usage: centrists often use reaction to identify hard Left opponents of ‘modernization’ (think use by ‘Blairites’ in the U.K., or ‘Clintonites’ in the U.S.); in turn, so-called hard Leftists condemn putative reactionary factions who obstruct ‘true’ goals (think use by ‘Corbynites’ in the U.K., or ‘Bernie-ites’ in the U.S.). In either instance, however, ‘reaction’ moves as the protagonists move. And so, perhaps worse than neglect, reaction is reduced to the acrobatics of political positioning.

Reaction, then, intuitively appears an important category, but is fuzzy. When nothing is done to obtain clarity, there is a disservice to interpretation and criticism alike. Of course, there is an obvious option – ditch the category entirely – but this article endorses a bolder tack. The starting point is to call for recognition of reaction not only from the analytical viewpoint of ideology study *but as an ‘ideology’*. In short, the dominant classificatory schemes of ideologies should be opened up so that reaction gets included amongst them. Endorsing this tack may seem like introducing one more definitional conceit having just poured cold water several others. So it is appropriate to flag up the empirical points of departure that preclude the manoeuvre from being arbitrary. One important cue to recognizing reaction as an ideology, I assert, is a basic, observable reality: reactionaries articulate variations upon a single stated thought. Wild as it may initially seem – for the idiomatic phrase is generally derogatory –⁹ reactionaries habitually profess that they stand on ‘the wrong side of History’. Hence, standing on History’s wrong side is an inductive starting-point for a research direction that alternately builds-in elements both of deduction and induction; that is, hopefully, viewing ‘real-world’ phenomena through a metaphorical lens, but not to the extent of forcing it into a mould. The variations on the stated thought are abundant (especially if one considers that History has fluctuating cognates from ‘Destiny’ to ‘true north’): Éric Zemmour: ‘History is always our code, but it is an altered, falsified, denatured History’.¹⁰ Donald Trump: ‘This American carnage stops right here and stops right now’.¹¹ Sarah Palin: ‘as a country, our true north is the values and principles on which we were founded – those values that are under attack

⁸E.g. Emily Robinson *et al.*, ‘Symposium on Progressive Politics’, *Political Studies Review*, 12:1 (2014), pp. 2–74.

⁹Karl Marx famously ridiculed reactionaries ‘for they try to roll back the wheel of history’. More recently, former US president Barack Obama – on the day after the presidential election of 2016 – offered a more consensual twist on the notion: ‘You know, the path this country has taken has never been a straight line. We zig and zag and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forwards and others think is moving back’. ‘Statement by the President’, *National Archives and Records Administration*, 9 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2A28UVs>.

¹⁰Éric Zemmour, *Le Suicide Français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), p. 10.

¹¹‘Donald Trump’s dark vision is the problem, not the solution’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 23 July 2016, p. 38.

today'.¹² Adolf Hitler: 'When over long periods of human history I scrutinized the activity of the Jewish people, suddenly there rose in me the fearful question whether inscrutable Destiny [...] did not desire the final victory of this little nation'.¹³

A caveat is that reaction may not qualify as a 'first-order' ideology (like liberalism, socialism, or conservatism),¹⁴ yet could have claims at a second-order level. The notion of a 'second-order' ideology, moreover, would align with the growing compunction among scholars to treat the ideological field as multi-layered.¹⁵ Can instances of ideological articulation belong to more than one category at the same time? Could ideological affiliations overlap and intertwine, rather than entail exclusivity? Some categories at the second-order level (and beyond) become especially intriguing: nothing precludes, say, articulations of 'Euroscepticism', 'alt-Right-ism', 'monarchism' or 'fascism' from simultaneous affiliation to reaction-ism – and, with an eye to political criticism, layering is especially auspicious, because chances of coming to appreciate novel connections expand. Take the current discourse of public intellectuals concerning the contemporary Right: arguably, this discourse is hardening into an unproductive dichotomy, whereby on the one hand are those largely abrogating the duty of meaningful historical comparison¹⁶ and, on the other, those reaching for the strongest categories too quickly.¹⁷ Nonchalance (or worse) thereby meets well-intentioned hyperbole, but the most attractive option might actually sit-in-between: to decamp to the bigger picture, so that perspectives may truly broaden, not narrow, and whereby appropriate parallels and precedents can be calibrated without being either irresponsibly deflated or prematurely affirmed.

We should not lost sight of the analytical preconditions. Before reaction can help serve either interpretive or critical functions, basic criteria for identifying ideologies will need to be met. Logically, the criteria for admission at second order do not differ from first order. As such, consider there must be (i) a pattern of interlinked features (internal criterion) and (ii) enclosure within reasonably specifiable boundaries (external criterion).¹⁸ These criteria provide structure to our search for a groundwork upwards from which to construct the fully-fledged ideological theory.

From 'populism' to reaction

So far reaction has been redescribed as a candidate ideology of the second order. With this, reaction enters into a new terrain: no longer is it merely a knockabout political boo-word,

¹²Sarah Palin, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith and Flag* (New York: Broadside Books, 2013), p. xvii.

¹³Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, transl. Ralph Mannheim (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 60.

¹⁴James Alexander, 'The Major Ideologies of Liberalism, Socialism and Conservatism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 63:5 (2015), pp. 980–994.

¹⁵Michael Freeden (ed) *Re-energising Ideology Studies: The Maturing of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶*Inter alia* see Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London: Penguin, 2018); David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2017); Eric Kaufman, *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

¹⁷*Inter alia*, see Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the America Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), p. 13; and Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Europe, Russia, America* (London: Bodley Head, 2018).

¹⁸See Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Ideological Analysis' in Adrian Blau (ed) *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

and neither is it a term of anachronism, reserved for purely historical study.¹⁹ Reaction now competes with a range of other categories for reckoning with contemporary developments on the hard Right. Of these, there is a foremost rival: ‘populism’.

‘Populism’ has a widespread public uptake. On the evidence of scholarly publications, populism also has the investment of perhaps the majority of academic commentators, with the dissenting voices to ‘today’s inflated currency of the term’ being a distinct minority.²⁰ But is the exposure deserved? Does populism serve us well? To be sure, ‘reaction’ and ‘populism’ are not labels-cum-theories which are in *direct* competition. The projected real-world scopes of applications of each may coincide, yet they differ (by no means are all reactionaries popular, nor would they wish to be). Furthermore, it is a corollary of the state-of-play of ideology studies sketched above that in order to do justice to a variegated and complex field, we might well need categories that are several. But while interpretive pluralism may be commendable in general, what I call for is, indeed, to re-invest in reaction quite consciously at populism’s expense, on the grounds that the semi-perfunctory, largely unreflective turn to populism is what frequently keeps the novel appreciation of connections at bay. Below, for three of the most common approaches to populism,²¹ I state one key respect in which we have failed; which is not meant as an exercise in academic one-upmanship, rather to pinpoint that from which a theory of reaction might learn. So as not to miss these lessons, they are stated by way of maxims.

- *Populism as the resort to new, highly-direct forms of communication, organisation and/or mobilisation.*²² This approach offers an unsatisfying lens on the contemporary hard Right for centring ideological innovation when more apt is something like ideological re-articulation. Colloquially, we ‘do’ politics differently now, which we need to ‘get over’, so as to ask more sophisticated questions about the adaptation which changes in an external technological environment require. So, ‘avoid overstating newness’.
- *Populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideological construct.*²³ This approach is welcome for repudiating that contemporary ideological developments are created *ex nihilo*, instead proposing historical contextualization for a type of politics which it deems to be configured around a single idea (‘the people’), and expressed stereotypically in the platforms of ‘people’s parties’. Yet the thin-centre provides for a history which is notably bitty and contained within periodic ‘eruptions’²⁴ – as though most of the time, ‘populists’

¹⁹E.g. John S McLelland, ‘The Reactionary Right: The French Revolution, Charles Maurras and the Action Française’ in Roger Eatwell and Noel Sullivan (eds) *The Nature of the Right: European and American Politics and Political Thought since 1789* (London: Pinter, 1989).

²⁰Marco D’Eramo, ‘They, The People’, *New Left Review*, 103 (2017), p. 131.

²¹Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, ‘Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda’ in *Weatherhead Working Paper Series*, 2013, No. 13-0004.

²²Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, ‘Populism as a Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties’ Discourse in Belgium’, *European Journal of Political Science*, 46:3 (2007), pp. 319–345; Robert R Barr, ‘Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics’, *Party Politics*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 29–48; Robert S Jansen, ‘Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Politics’, *Sociological Theory*, 29:2 (2011), pp. 75–96.

²³Cass Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Margaret Canovan, ‘Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy’ in Yves Meny and Yves Surel (eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Ben Stanley, ‘The Thin Ideology of Populism’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13:1 (2008), pp. 95–110; Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Strictly-speaking, Müller does not foreground a conceptual core, rather an elemental ‘logic’.

²⁴John B Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

were reassuringly sated.²⁵ In principle bittiness could be true of the historical record, but is perhaps also the false impression derived from looking little further than actors and movements calling themselves ‘populist’, which for the theory of any ideology is an imperfect principle for selecting source material, inasmuch as being both incomplete and unreliable. Hence, ‘avoid getting hung-up on self-description’.

- *Populism as a marker of discourse, especially discursive (or sometimes performative) ‘style’.*²⁶ The discourse approach, encouragingly, usually takes up the long view without rendering populism counterfactually subterranean. Shorn of the extravagances of discourse theory (which may make it persuasive to a broader audience), it boils down to the notion that we know we are in populism’s presence if we can observe an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ logic to public-political argument.²⁷ However, quite aside from perhaps now making the category a little *too* inclusive, the emphatic nature of the us-versus-them logic seems to fly in the face of some of the prosaic realities with which people take up political positions: namely, that people flirt with positions, or flit to and fro. The ups-and-downs of political support metrics, for example, suggest that hard-Rightists are not dyed-in-the-wool. Lastly, then, ‘avoid reifying ideological subjects’. For as human beings, they may be mercurial.

These maxims from the interpretive deficiencies of populism bear drawing out explicitly. Avoid overstating newness? Being able to lay claim to long-term indicators is one of reaction’s strengths. Avoid getting hung-up on self-descriptions? We are scarcely likely to do so, since if only ‘out’ reactionaries were to count there would be precious little to go upon in the first place (the self-description is generally toxic). But note there is an important distinction between what in my own scheme amounts to privileging reactionary *self-understanding* (the wrong side of History) and reactionary *self-labelling*. Avoid reifying the human subjects of ideology? This is special reason to be sensitive towards reaction’s external boundaries. For, whilst they must be reasonably specifiable, boundaries that may be porous do not negate the existence of an autonomous category *per se*.

So opportunities for reviving reaction seem ample in view of the problems experienced by other theories. Do not forget there is also the simple sense in which doing so ought to be advantageous, with reference to the stalemate between public intellectuals. Even if reaction’s claims to validity ahead of populism were hollow, the very act of *shifting focus* ought to shake up the standard reference points, making space for unfamiliar thoughts, perceptions and images: empirically, a theory of political reaction will bring together a collection of instances of right-wing politics different to those subsumable under populism. But, to the extent they are expounded, what next of the documented theories of reaction? If populism is to be junked, what is it that requires us to re-formulate reaction, before we can boost its credentials for recognition as an ideology? There is a common reason to set documented theories aside: ineffectual units of analysis.

²⁵The priority of the concept ‘the people’ is also distinct from the concept’s complexion. Even if the former is historically continuous, the latter might vary.

²⁶Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Francisco Panizza (ed) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005); Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey. ‘Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style’, *Political Studies*, 62:2 (2014), pp. 381–397; Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

²⁷Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Paris Aslandis, ‘Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective’, *Political Studies*, 64:1 (2016), pp. 88–104.

Why extant theories of reaction fail

The extant theories of reaction are a mix of the old and the new, whereby the recent theorists of most note are Corey Robin,²⁸ Peter King,²⁹ and Mark Lilla.³⁰ Lilla aside, the shortcomings can be said to derive from operationalizing units of analysis which will not work. The abortive units for reactionary ideology are, respectively: dispositions; social interests; and concepts. A first position dubiously psycho-pathologizes a political orientation that, if disquieting, is nonetheless quite regular. A second position is confounded by unexpected modes of identity politics, for which it tries in vain to locate a materialist basis. A third position searches for a coherent conceptual vocabulary to reaction which, we should conjecture, is never to be found.

Dispositions

To theorize reactionary dispositions is not foolish *per se*. To the contrary, it would seem eminently sensible to tune into both the strongly affective and seemingly extraordinary qualities reactionaries display. Popularly – but not absurdly – reactionaries (whether they are leaders or followers) are tracked to distinctive personality-types: for instance, the zealot, the narcissist, the sexual repressive, the sadist, the ‘Colonel Blimp’ (British expression for patrician curmudgeon), the ‘Pooter’ (ditto for self-important suburban bourgeois). These have equivalents in a scholarly setting. An old idea here is the ‘authoritarian personality’.³¹ Newer impetus comes from work on ideology in political psychology.³²

To cast reactionaries as blend of the mad, bad and stupid is, therefore, a temptation that comes from several quarters. Yet it contravenes some standard precepts of sound analysis, which ultimately there are no reasons to forego. First, when dispositions are theorized, there is a stasis ascribed to reactionaries. The social and intersubjective dimension of human experience liable to influence belief-formation is all but bracketed off. At worst, that facilitates the misleading conclusion that one does not *become* a reactionary, because one is born so. Second, theorizing dispositions is to commit a social-science sin of supposing ‘deviancy’. That is problematic for a number of reasons which one does not need to be strong Foucauldian to appreciate, but to turn one eye already towards rhetoric, it is to err by discounting – in advance – any possibility that reactionaries might be a product of an internal dialogue.³³

Social interests

The social dimension, conversely, is to the fore in the account of reaction proffered by various kinds of Marxist, all of whom feature the particular category of ‘social interest’.

²⁸Robin, *op. cit.*

²⁹King, *Reaction*, *op. cit.*; King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (London: Routledge, 2014).

³⁰Lilla, *Shipwrecked Mind*, *op. cit.*

³¹Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1950).

³²Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

³³Hannah Arendt, ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’ in Jerome Kohn (ed) *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2013).

The political success of reaction here is also normal – hardly uncommon – though because this scholarship is more extended, it is suitable to catalogue its faults by ‘testing’ it in hypothetical kinds of scenario: simple, awkward, and hard cases of reaction.

First, the ‘simple’ case is well handled by Corey Robin: social superiors possess one interest, social ‘subordinates’ another – and the ‘superiors’ win out. The main thrust of Robin’s thesis presents reaction in these über-materialist terms: ‘since the modern era began’, he writes, ‘men and women in subordinate positions have marched against their superiors’, and ‘in virtually every instance, their superiors have resisted them’.³⁴ The main thrust is only partly restrained by periodic concessions to reaction’s more value-driven and dynamic aspects (an animating ‘principle’ of natural hierarchy, an interesting philosophical relationship between ‘loss’ and violence).³⁵ The fault is that occurrences in the real world frequently elude the simple case.

Second, the ‘awkward’ case acknowledges that followers of reaction can include notional ‘subordinates’ – who receive no realistic prospect of material gain in exchange for their allegiance. Think so-called ‘Church and King’ uprisings staged historically by Western European peasant groups.³⁶ An account like Robin’s tends to call up auxiliary ‘false consciousness’ explanations in this scenario: subordinate groups let go of their interests because they are permeated by ideology which is dominant.³⁷ To the extent that false consciousness are widely discredited in contemporary social science,³⁸ the inadequacy of this propping-up strategy need not be lingered upon. But, potentially, revisionist perspectives emerging out of post-Marxism offer more robust accommodation. For Ernesto Laclau, precepts of classical Marxism need revising to take account of identity politics, in effect: the identities of those who compose the subordinate groups are not pre-settled, only in need of activation via correct consciousness-raising, but are actively up for discursive negotiation, with open-ended possibilities.³⁹ In consequence of this move, there is a degree of purchase obtained on the ‘real-world’ awkward cases: for instance, not only peasants who turned out for king, but urban workers were among those who ‘went’ fascist,⁴⁰ or women who opposed the suffrage.⁴¹

Third, however, there is the ‘hard’ case, which not even the most innovative of Marxisms will get around. Here, for example, the peasant, worker, or woman supporting reaction will not merely put material well-being on hold, but will flatly and actively defy it – acting as though it were no consideration at all. This scenario is timely, of course. Why is it that the non-privileged are not simply among the hard Right’s backers but often the most conspicuous – given to expressing the most ire in protest and advocacy? Post-Marxism thinks of political history and present politics in terms of turning-points-that-failed-to-

³⁴Ibid., p. 3; italics added.

³⁵Robin, op. cit., p. 255 fn. 80, 17, 218. A second edition updates the scope of coverage to include the Trump presidency but leaves the main perspective intact: Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁶George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (London: Serif, 2005).

³⁷Sheri Berman, ‘The Conservative as Elitist’, *The New York Times*, 7 October 2011.

³⁸Andrew Shorten, *Contemporary Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 221–225.

³⁹Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 2011); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001); Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁴⁰Richard F. Hamilton, *Who Voted for Hitler?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁴¹Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

turn (cf. the interwar Western working-class that failed to go communist).⁴² Reaction is therefore understood from a dubious presumption, even if only implicit: that politics has run off-course.

By approaching reaction as a sort of barometer of the specific (and presumably lapsed) state of the class struggle, the analytical imagination, I suggest, is irredeemably blunted. Even outside of Marxism, it is worth noting, sociological writing struggles with the hard case. Consider the assorted work on on U.S. blue-collar Republicanism devoted to fathoming ‘what’s the matter with Kansas’, or the ‘strangers’ of the ‘deep South’, or the ‘hillbillies’ of Appalachia. This, by honing in on representative place and person, succeeds in tapping into reaction as a raw, ‘lived’ experience, yet still manages to muffle the voices of white working-class identity politics, by tracking it to the distortion either of redistributive instincts or a natural blue-collar work ethic.⁴³ The lesson is the general one to take out of the failure of the social interest approach: start to take seriously the possibility that really in play are not distortions, rather genuine convictions.

Concepts

Trying to reconstruct social interests in order to produce a general theory of political reaction is, then, a dead end. What this points to is the need to make far greater use of the evidence of what people actually think. Concepts are a standard unit by which to itemize stated beliefs and, in particular, to render such beliefs into a system.

A conceptual approach to ideologies relies on methods imported from political philosophy.⁴⁴ It supposes that ideological subjects neither mechanically obey interests, nor have those interests systematically manipulated behind their backs, rather make choices that to a large extent are knowing: they elect some concepts, not others; they assign them into orders of priority; they refine them into conceptions; and they aim at rough consistency between conceptions.⁴⁵ But are regular, ordered, consistent conceptions detectable in reaction-ism? The answer would seem to be that they are not, and the recent account offered by British commentator, Peter King, is symptomatic. In extrapolating from paradigmatic cases, the most that King is able to match together are four ‘senses’ – each, notably, identifiable only in negative terms. King writes:

reaction can be simply summarised by a number of basic propositions ... First, there is general sense of disaffection ... Second, many people feel they are not being listened to ... Third, many feel that their traditions and accepted ways of life are being threatened ... Fourth, what might be seen as the “establishment” ... always excludes them ...⁴⁶

As an identifying core this is slight, as King acknowledges. His response is to sub-divide reactionaries, in order to try for the more extended conceptual definition which would be

⁴²Allegedly, the proletariat missed its ‘rendezvous with History’: Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, p. 128.

⁴³Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York, NY: Picador, 2005); J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (London: William Collins, 2016), pp. 140–145. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the America Right* (London: New Press, 2016), is a less closed account.

⁴⁴Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Gerald Gauss, *Political Concepts and Political Theories* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

⁴⁵Michael Freeden, ‘The Morphological Study of Ideology’ in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶King, *Reaction*, op. cit, pp. 29–30.

satisfying – splitting the conceptual commitments of cultural ‘antimodernists’ from the beliefs of ‘commonsense’ reactionaries.⁴⁷ But sub-division may be premature, not least of all because it reneges on the ‘big picture’ promise of a theory of reaction which (as discussed earlier) would allow us to illuminate contemporary trends by placing them in broad contexts of reference. Yet, at the same time, it is trying to attain satisfying definition of reactionaries only by sub-division which is the next prod to my own approach. Sub-division brings one of reactionism’s most fundamental apparent realities to heel, when the task, really, ought to be to accept that reality, but then to explain it: contradiction, including self-contradiction.

If, as at last as we begin to with the conceptual approach, we take reactionaries to be sincere belief-utterers, then sorting them into boxes is, certainly, one option for dealing with reaction’s apparent contradictoriness: in one box, say, are the reactionaries who by invoking God, espouse moral absolutism; in one another are those who in celebrating local custom, espouse moral relativism. But maybe contradiction should not be moved on from too lightly? Perhaps, in fact, contradictoriness gets to the heart of the conceptual structures of reactionary political belief? I follow a thread from this intuition in just a moment. But for now, for illustration’s sake, reflect on how reactionaries handle two exemplar concepts: science and the state. Plenty of right-wingers oscillate between extolling science over effeminate artiness and disparaging science as the fraud licensing objectionable ‘experts’,⁴⁸ but the same single mind cannot hold the two thoughts simultaneously: at least, not logically. Likewise, logical contradiction occurs when a reactionary’s appraisals of the role of state starkly disagree, as in these colloquial examples: ‘the state should look after people who have given service’ versus ‘people should not expect the state to bail them out of trouble’.

These examples are merely anecdotal. But if one thing normal to reactionaries is that what they believe, *they believe earnestly, yet conflictingly*, the implication is substantial. To genuinely get at their ideology, we may need take up not the most obvious units, but the units of rhetoric. Why? Rhetoric can allow that reactionaries are persuaded – not duped (and certainly not born so) – but persuaded whereby the premium on sound reasoning is low, and where an active role is played not just by argument *per se*, rather by political emotion and, for example, assessments of character.

Using rhetoric to theorize reaction

To turn to rhetoric in order to understand reaction is to amplify a point of emphasis in Lilla’s account to date: argumentation, the energising of reaction in the public square.⁴⁹ It is also to follow in the footsteps of Albert O. Hirschman, although by discarding certain of Hirschman’s assumptions about the nature of rhetoric.⁵⁰ The achievement of the recent ‘rhetoric revival’ in political studies on either side of the Atlantic has been much greater methodological self-awareness.⁵¹ Such a revival has gathered momentum

⁴⁷See his follow-up study: King, *The Antimodern Condition*, op. cit.

⁴⁸Cf. Matthew d’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury, 2017).

⁴⁹Lilla, *Shipwrecked Mind*, op. cit. One limit of Lilla’s approach is his range of cases: he concentrates solely on the writings of intellectuals.

⁵⁰Hirschman, op. cit. Cf. Shorten, op. cit.

⁵¹Bryan Garsten, ‘The Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14 (2011), pp. 159–180.

in several subfields: history of political thought,⁵² deliberative democracy,⁵³ Arendtian political theory,⁵⁴ rational choice analysis,⁵⁵ policy analysis.⁵⁶ However, although there exist important precedents in the practice of ‘rhetorical criticism’ within communication studies in the United States, seldom have the implications for ideology study been spelled out.⁵⁷ Shortly, therefore, I list some basic tenets for rhetorical ideological analysis to follow; doing so selectively, mainly in the aim of dispelling preconceptions.

Rhetoric, I suggest, can be the solution to discovering reaction’s internal pattern. But it merits saying that while rhetoric may also tend to the external ideological criterion (helping sketch a boundary), there is nothing axiomatic in rhetorical method to command that the boundary will be rigid and impermeable. That is important, since Mark Lilla implies otherwise. Roughly, Lilla’s assumption seems to be that because conservatism has clear, tangible markers (like tradition, particularism, concreteness, economic prudence), there is a sharp line with reaction conceivable. Certainly, that position is desirable over rendering conservatism and reaction indistinguishable – the position which Corey Robin is committed to. Yet, put into the earlier terms of this article, Lilla may not have moved beyond one of the defects of populism: to avoid reifying reactionaries. That chimes with the finding beneath which I label as ideological ‘vacillation’: that ideological subjects, as language-users, show signs of a tendency to step in/out of reaction and to/from conservatism.

The aim of this final section in itself, however, is simply to defend the groundwork for the more substantial project that may confirm and extend findings like the one concerning blurred dividing lines. In it, the general advantages of a rhetorical approach are converted into a more particular rationale: for reading, sometimes re-reading, bad books. The key argument is that the rhetoric discloses the basic and regular communicative practice of reactionaries: namely, participation in the diatribe format. This, therefore, now provides a second inductive starting-point for closer investigation, when placed next to the proposition that reactionaries show a regular self-understanding (standing on the ‘wrong side of History’). Notice the implications for empirical study: a model of the diatribe provides parameters for the appropriate selection of source material.

What a rhetorical theory of ideology is and is not

Rhetoric enriches the study of ideology by affording communication special priority. But a rhetorical theory of ideology is not several of the things it can be taken to be. Several sources of the rhetoric revival in political studies take inspiration from Aristotle’s *The*

⁵²E.g. Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, Vol. 1 *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defence of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Daniel Kapust, *Republicanism, Rhetoric and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵³E.g. John Dryzek, ‘Rhetoric in Democracy: A Systemic Appreciation’, *Political Theory*, 38:3 (2010), pp. 309–339.

⁵⁴E.g. Linda Zerrilli, ‘“We Feel Our Freedom”: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt’, *Political Theory*, 33:2 (2005), pp. 158–188.

⁵⁵E.g. Iain McLean, *Rational Choice and British Politics: An Analysis of Rhetoric and Manipulation from Peel to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁶Frank Fischer and Gerald J. Miller (eds.), *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Part V.

⁵⁷The salient exception is Alan Finlayson, ‘Ideology and Political Rhetoric’ in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For noteworthy engagements with ideology from within communication studies, see Raymie E. McKerrow, ‘Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis’, *Communication Monographs*, 56:2 (1989), pp. 91–111, and Philip Wander, ‘The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism’, *Central States Speech Journal*, 34:1 (1983), pp. 1–18.

Art of Rhetoric,⁵⁸ and to develop tenets for rhetorical ideological analysis I follow their lead. The effect is to disavow the following:

- *Rhetoric is not (or not only) tactical*. As Aristotle opined, rhetoric's purpose is not the production of persuasion from without, rather the 'detection of the persuasive aspects' latent within.⁵⁹ To build a rhetorical theory so that ideologists speak nothing *but* their convictions would tie one hand behind its back. Yet *ceteris paribus*, communicators should be presumed to be sincere.⁶⁰
- *Rhetoric is not 'affect-displacement'*. Communication is on-going, deliberative and interactive, meaning that an audience's 'emotional state' is itself open to influence, as opposed to being pre-set;⁶¹ and entailing that reactionaries may do more interesting things with speech than simply re-channel 'democratic anger'.⁶²
- *Rhetoric is not supplementary*. It is actual ideological substance, and not the outfits which the subject of ideology dresses her belief is up, at the point of deciding he wants to convince others. Most important of all, then, rhetoric can include talking oneself into belief.⁶³

What is borrowed from Aristotle in the more positive sense concerns his explication of rhetorical 'composition'.⁶⁴ Aristotle asks, how should a speech be arranged? Within the ambit of his answer to this question, I find the provocation to locate the characteristic reactionary communication medium of the diatribe. Once formalized, we have a *de facto* template for exploring reactionary texts – ideally, bringing out into the open as-yet-unknown particular features of the ideology, as well as pointers for their potential interlinkage. Some illustrators of (re)reading texts on the template of the diatribe are sketched in a short while.

Diatribe

Trump's nothing like Hitler ... There's no way he could write a book.

Scottish comedian, Frankie Boyle⁶⁵

As with much of what makes the category of reaction appealing, one can reach for 'diatribe' intuitively. Diatribe belongs to a loose cluster of genres keyed in a vague sort of way to feelings like bitterness, regret, grief and nostalgia, and which includes the 'jeremiad' and the 'elegy'.⁶⁶ Ordinarily, diatribes are rants: they have the qualities of being forceful,

⁵⁸Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, transl. H.C. Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 2004). See, for example, Bernard Yack, 'Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian Understanding of Political Deliberation', *Political Theory*, 34:4 (2006), pp. 417–438. A useful explication of Aristotle's scheme can be found in Jon Hesk, 'Types of Oratory', in Erik Gunderson (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 145–161.

⁵⁹Aristotle, op. cit., p. 69–70.

⁶⁰The contrary position is featured in James Martin, 'Situating Speech: A Rhetorical Approach to Political Strategy', *Political Studies*, 63:1 (2015), pp. 25–42.

⁶¹Aristotle, op. cit., p. 76.

⁶²E.g. Jeremy Engels, *The Politics of Resentment: A Genealogy* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015), p. 6.

⁶³Cf. Victoria McVeer and Philip Pettit, 'Sticky Judgment and the Role of Rhetoric', in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (eds) *Political Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 65–67. Note that Aristotle's own account does not extend the reach of rhetoric from inter- to intra-personal contexts of reference.

⁶⁴Aristotle, op. cit., pp. 245–262.

⁶⁵'What do you think of the year's funniest joke?' Available at <http://news.sky.com/story/what-do-you-think-of-the-years-funniest-joke-10999344> (accessed 20 October 2017).

⁶⁶E.g. see Andrew Murphy, 'Longing, Nostalgia and Golden Age Politics: The American Jeremiad and the Power of the Past', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7:1 (2009), pp. 125–141.

moralizing, conversational, anecdotal and vulgar. The OED stipulates that in modern use, diatribe is a noun meaning ‘a dissertation or discourse directed against some person or work; a bitter and violent criticism; or invective’.⁶⁷ In political science, attention shown to the diatribe as expressive form has been curiously minimal. The exception is Windt, yet whose own effort at retrieval is hampered by overplaying the connotation of shock-value: he thinks that in politics, diatribe correlates with a ploy of using obscenity to disrupt prevailing values – allegedly, a missing link between the ancient Cynics and Vietnam war protest⁶⁸ – but this is unwarranted, because obscenity cuts up against one of the everyday connotations which is most useful to revive: that diatribes strike an accessible tone. What may need clarifying, I add, is only that this accessibility to a broad audience does not preclude diatribes being open to quite intellectualized articulation. The extended presence of typical features such humour and irony should not be mistaken for lack of intelligent reflection. Indeed, perhaps there is one extra challenge for the interpretation of reactionaries if practiced within a ‘scholarly’ setting: academia’s own rhetorical norms potentially make for seeing diatribes everywhere (understatement, the tendency to qualification, and so forth).

From everyday associations, we have several miscellaneous qualities for diatribe, plus the notion of a discourse directed against someone or something. But, to get from rough form to actual model, we must look to the ancients. The refinement that the classical sources offer for this model of the diatribe is as follows. In the Greek, Roman and early Christian worlds, the meaning of the diatribe was not wholly different to our own.⁶⁹ But there is special significance in the Greek root term *diatribein*, which is worth reconnecting with because it adds to the referents. The early meaning was of a ‘wearing away (of time)’. From this, the classicist Barbara Wallach sums up the original idea of the diatribe in a nutshell: ‘dwelling on the point’.⁷⁰ To do so, Wallach in part identifies Aristotle’s early discussion, and it is worth taking that forward via some creative extrapolation. Aristotle would appear to give diatribe two associations. The first association is with the speaker maximizing ‘opportunities for delay’,⁷¹ which extends the sense of point-dwelling. This alone is important, because in rhetorical terms it pinpoints the repetition of a message with the likely effect of reinforcing it. Therefore, the reader of reactionary writings is readied to be on the lookout for passages of text that enable conclusions about reactionary ‘style’: in the peeling away of repetition of phrase, question or sentence-part, is some hidden meaning revealed? However, the second association of Aristotle may be more telling. That is where we may speak of diatribe as a permutation of rhetorical ‘composition’. In other words, we are presented with an outline map for the internal structure of the text. Conventionally, in classical rhetoric, a speech has four parts. The *bona fide* reactionary text, I suggest, is just the same. Accordingly, in (i) an *exordium* (or introduction), a reactionary showcases his personal credentials; in (ii) a *narration*, he states his case in brief; in (iii) a *proof*, he demonstrates his case and tries to refute his adversary’s; and in (iv) an *epilogue* (or ‘peroration’) he stirs – perhaps re-stirs – the audience to emotion to

⁶⁷OED. ‘Diatribe, n.’. Available at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52133> (accessed 12 October 2017).

⁶⁸Theodor Otto Windt Jr., ‘The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58:1 (1972), pp. 1–14.

⁶⁹Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁷⁰Barbara Price Wallach, ‘*Epimone* and *Diatribe*: Dwelling on the Point in Ps.-Hermogenes’, *Rheinische Museum für Philologie*, 123:3/4 (1980), pp. 272–323.

⁷¹Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 256.

end upon.⁷² The most characteristic qualities of diatribe arise at the proof stage.⁷³ In Aristotle's second association, to diatribe is 'to digress'.⁷⁴ Furthermore, digression when you are (should be) setting out your arguments will be peculiar within the genre of rhetoric that belongs to politics (which is 'deliberative', or aimed at justifying future courses of action): your subject is evident – and will have been introduced in the exordium; and you find that one of the few doors open to you is to digress by 'attack'.⁷⁵ Hence, on my extrapolated definition, diatribe is – in particular – discourse which is punctuated by regular digression and extended significantly by recourse to blame.

Finally, should substantive qualitative analysis of reaction focus on the diatribe either in the written or spoken word? It is for two main reasons I advocate attention to the written and print format. First, there is some sense in rebalancing what is a more usual focus upon the 'talk' discourses of the hard Right.⁷⁶ The writings of reactionaries are an underused resource, but they are myriad. Hence, the joke used as an epigraph above may be funny, but is far from true. 'Books' have been produced not only by Trump (and Hitler) but, to name but a few, by Sarah Palin, Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Anders Breivik, Joe McCarthy. Ghost-writing applies in some of these cases, but that is beside the point: what matters the substance of communication, not the dynamics of production, and in such books we ought to find we are provided with rich, overlooked pointers regarding, *inter alia*, how reactionary ideology is assembled, how it is validated, how it mutates. Second, attention to the written text is the most reliable way of providing reaction with historical contextualization. Necessarily, certain media were off limits at an earlier time (say, talk radio), and so in order to control for the transmission mechanisms it is necessary to pare the focus down. But note that 'books' encompass great variation. For instance, some reactionary writings may comprise campaign texts, forcing any generalized political reflection very sharply through the issues of the moment; others may aspire to the status of being wide-ranging treatises. The variation is significant only to the extent that the analyst must be mindful not to impute any kind of hierarchy, and so potentially mistake what is common to reaction in the process, by reading 'higher' and 'lower'-end texts according to different procedures.

Illustrative cases

Summarizing, everyday use and classical instruction converge on three catchy soundbite features of diatribe: digression, repetition, and point-dwelling. In advance of a conclusion, I rehearse the method with four sample cases (covering politics from past to present). My commentaries are only rough sketches, meant to be augmented by more patient analysis, although they ought to showcase what (re)reading texts as diatribes would look like, and I deliberately include the emerging evidence on behalf of ideological vacillation: that there are numerous occasions in which reactionary stated belief runs into conservative stated belief (and/ or back again). Each commentary begins with a reference to 'rhetorical

⁷²Richard Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 171–174.

⁷³E.M. Cope, *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric* (London and Cambridge: MacMillan and Co., 1867), p. 359.

⁷⁴Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 256.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (eds) *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text* (London: Routledge, 2013).

situation'.⁷⁷ That allows the idiosyncrasies of the texts to be assessed against the likely expectations of particular audiences.

Reflections on the Revolution in France

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* takes a pamphlet form, is published in 1790 (at an early stage of the French Revolution) and, practically-speaking, for a English readership. The remit of the book thereby seems implied by institutional context, namely to challenge emerging revolutionary principles for an audience in Britain. *Reflections* has a grand reputation: as a touchstone of modern conservative thought, and as model of elegance in the English language (its numerous witticisms, for example, are widely cited). Even confined analysis disputes these notions.

Looking closely at an 'exordium' is the first phase of our envisaged analysis. In *Reflections*, an opening has its most arresting facet in introducing a distinctive rhetorical device: apostrophe. Apostrophe is a technique whereby speaker detaches himself from topic to address a third party who duly becomes an imaginary character in the discourse themselves.⁷⁸ Even more specifically, Burke allows his pamphlet to emulate the epistolatory form (a letter), and the third party in question is Charles-Jean-François Dupont: a notional 'gentleman in Paris' towards whom he claims to be imparting solicited advice. This technique itself is an oddity – use of apostrophe is reckoned to be rare even within early modern European discourse –⁷⁹ but additionally, what might make it tempting to assimilate it to the diatribe is evidence that, assuming for the moment that the motive is tactical, the implementation is sloppy. This is because the author fails to keep his address to the third party consistent: by a fifth page he has 'begged leave' to discuss potential fomenters of revolution not in France, but in England, especially the case of the dissenting London minister, Richard Price.⁸⁰ Indeed, it emerges that unsmooth transitions like these are a characteristic of *Reflections* overall – they have the effect of bouncing the reader's attention around. Increasingly, there are signs that the third-party device is being persisted with mainly to meet an impromptu need. *Reflections* employs no normal chapter divisions (only weakly mitigated for by the epistolatory form). The side effect is to multiply exponentially how frequently the prose gets ahead of itself or wanders off point. And, at such times, it is by writing sympathetic private asides to his 'gentleman in Paris' that he adapts *ad hoc* means for getting the prose back on track (making insertions like '... this, my dear Sir, was not the triumph of France').⁸¹

'Narration' in a rhetorical composition should supply an early compressed statement of the case ahead but, in that case, in *Reflections* such a statement is delayed and takes the passage of some thirty-five pages of throat-clearing to reach.⁸² Is the compressed case equivalent to the case which Burke's reputation prepares us for? That would consist in

⁷⁷Lloyd Bitzer, 'The Rhetorical Situation' in John Lucaites, C.M. Condit and S. Caudill (eds.), *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory* (London: Guildford Press, 1998), pp. 217–226.

⁷⁸Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (London: University of California Press, 1991), p. 20.

⁷⁹Christopher Reid, 'Burke as Rhetorician and Orator' in David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 47.

⁸⁰Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' in Iain Hampsher-Monk (ed) *Revolutionary Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 5.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 68. In rhetoric, the broken-script device is 'aposioposis': Robert Cockcroft and Susan Cockcroft, *Persuading People: An Introduction to Rhetoric* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 86.

⁸²*Ibid.*, pp. 36–41.

an application to contemporary France – and, by extension, Britain – of the case against radical political innovation, and in favour of tradition-guided reform (an argument that, in 1790 – pre-Jacobinism – is certainly open for Burke to make). Charitably, that case is pursued piecemeal – in attenuated reference to the repair of France’s ‘ancient’ constitution – but what appears curious is the weight does not rest on recommendation and advice, but instead falls upon blame. Even a minor seeming detail like grammatical tense evinces this: ‘You might, if you pleased, have profited of our example, and have given to your recovered freedom a correspondent dignity’.⁸³ As a grammatical construction, this sentence is an abnormality, since it is past-tense-conditional and requires mental time-travel on the part of the reader to grasp (i.e. a completed action is the subject of the sentence, but it is an action which never really took place).

Because, in diatribe, proof will be extended by digression, that the main body of *Reflections* should offer abundant material of interest is predictable. Pointers thus emerge for how expanded analysis might examine the slippage between conservative and reactionary modes. The reputed Burke, of course, is ‘conservative’, and articulates the tangible markers of that ideology (defends social organicism premised in natural hierarchy, is sceptical towards grand schemes founded upon abstraction). Three rough phases of argumentation within the main body expose the vacillation alike. First, in accord with apparent intentions, Burke enumerates emerging revolutionary principles, but there is slippage between modes because incongruous denunciation of the high-bred features alongside the expectable defamation of the lowly ‘Third Estate’: self-abasing French noblemen are ‘turbulent, discontented men of quality’ who betray ‘their own’ by joining the revolutionary ranks. Lest we rush to re-code this as ‘populism’, notice how much bagginess there is in the ally Burke reaches out to: sometimes ‘the people of England’, but also those who are ‘generous enemies’, ‘for God’, ‘look up with awe to Kings’, or possess ‘real hearts of flesh and blood’.⁸⁴ Second, Burke contrasts Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment eras, building up to a crescendo in the florid ode to Marie-Antoinette. That is very easily reinterpreted as digression because Burke mock-apologises for such on the page: ‘Excuse me, therefore, if I have dwelt too long on this atrocious spectacle’.⁸⁵ Third, an exegesis of the proper bases of the social order (religion and the ‘spirit of gentlemen’) does pass through a rendition of the famed critique of abstraction (ideas are meaningless without practical contexts of reference), but meanwhile appears dragged along, almost unintentionally, to a vaguer but stronger thesis: the evil of abstractions is to effect a *tabula rasa* in politics from which atheists can run amok and liberate all kinds of human wrongdoing.

A recognizable ‘epilogue’ concludes *Reflections* and, certainly, compared to the foregoing, is a paragon of succinctness (confined to three pages). Yet something else is striking. Perhaps, after exhausting bouts of frenzied attack, tone and message are unsurprisingly weary, falling somewhere between resignation and forgiveness: ‘... let us be satisfied to admire rather than attempt to follow in their desperate flights the aeronauts of France’.⁸⁶

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 68, 98, 89.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 249.

Considerations on France

The rhetorical situation of Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France* is partly similar, but moves from England to France (excepting that Maistre writes as a subject of the House of Savoy and that, in due course, the Directory was to forbid the sale of the book inside French borders). The text is concerned with the same historical events, but *Considerations* is not published until 1797 and, importantly, therefore speaks to an audience for whom the full extent of the revolutionary Terror – the guillotine – is known. A more particular objective discernible is to de-legitimise recent experiences within a theological view of the world. More prosaically, it appears Maistre plans to accomplish what he wants to achieve within a compacter space (*Considerations* is a shorter work than *Reflections*, half the length at 120 pages). Political philosophers have seldom taken Maistre's ideas seriously, and historians of ideas most of all have been struck by the emphasis on slaughter, yet it should not be assumed that deflating *Considerations* is uncontroversial, since there are defenders of Maistre, still, who maintain that he wrote angelically.⁸⁷

The exordium of *Considerations* is fierce and sets up the book's strongly moralizing register. The striking opening sentence inverts the sentiments of the parallel opening sentence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (which more literate contemporaries would have recognized as the revolutionaries' how-to manual): 'We are all attached to the throne of Supreme Being by a supple chain that restrains us without enslaving us'. The identification of an adversary is a conventional opening gambit of rhetorical compositions, but far more unusual is that the audience is admonished: 'in the works of man, everything is as wretched as their author'.⁸⁸ Grasped in reference to the doctrine of original sin, Maistre's strictures about the dangers of human pride do echo the Christian theology in exhibit. Yet, they could also offer food for thought about the general ambivalence with which reactionaries may avert to attack and blame.

Over four pages at the end of chapter one, *Considerations* performs narration. Maistre previews the case that revolutionary violence is divine punishment for mankind's dethroning God for human rationality. Self-understanding by standing on the wrong side of History is communicated early and explicitly: 'we are spoiled by a modern philosophy that tells us *all is good*, whereas evil has tainted everything'.⁸⁹ That is joined by a metaphor that serves as a solace to fellow reactionaries, an effective message within a message: a 'black magic' is at work in God's hidden orchestration of revolutionary events, such that '*we may admire order in disorder*', self-aware that a purer France will emerge on the other side of all the violence.⁹⁰

Point-dwelling is a manifest feature of proof in *Considerations*. That is perhaps no more evident than in regard to the death of King Louis XVI. Maistre lets his writing linger here – returning to the king's death three times – and the bloodiness of the act is underlined. On one occasion, the act is explicitly juxtaposed with the gruesome execution of the late eighteenth-century regicide, Damiens, as made notorious by Michel Foucault.⁹¹ Another time

⁸⁷See King, *Antimodern Condition*, op. cit., esp. pp. 16–20.

⁸⁸Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, edited by Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 14; italics added.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 30.

he solicits his readers to join him in venting against those more *politick* kind of Frenchmen who, by the late 1790s, have reconciled themselves to the Revolution, though not out of conscience, rather self-serving prudence. Intriguingly, this appears in the guise of black humour, an acid impersonation: ‘Very well, it was perhaps unnecessary to execute the king; but since the deed is done, do not mention it again and let us all be good friends. Madness!’.⁹² And yet, the main body of *Considerations* is not all fire and brimstone. Perhaps there exists a connection between those aspects of literary quality his defenders play up and his movement into the more moderate positions. *Considerations* is actually neatly arranged into eleven equivalent length chapters, such that the fierce declamatory style is belied by some conscientious internal organization. Between chapters two to eight appear two apparent segments of positive demonstration followed by a sequence of ‘refutations’ (of republican political theory, of Enlightenment philosophy, and of various schemes for constitution-making). In particular, the refutation of republican political theory yields moments where reaction cedes to the conservative motif of pragmatism – embodied in Maistre’s rejoinder that if popular sovereignty is to prevail then institutions for expressing it must not be geographically located solely in Paris, and also in his analogy that building a democratic republic is like dice-rolling, since there is a small chance it will succeed but a bigger chance it will not.⁹³

The epilogue of *Considerations* is a missed chance for the author to wrap up his message in a pleasing and concise ending. After the sequence of refutations, active deliberation about a future course of action seems to the fore in the selection of the topic of the ‘counter-revolution’: how it may pass, how fears about it might be allayed. But these chapters nine and ten are supplemented by redundant loquaciousness in an additional chapter eleven, which very surely counts as digression, and in fact could hardly be stranger, since it comprises verbatim passages from the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, concerning events in seventeenth-century England, but repackaged as if they were a comment on France’s present.

America by Heart

Sarah Palin’s *America by Heart* is a 288-page book published in 2010 and a follow-up to her memoir-styled *Going Rogue* published the year before.⁹⁴ The institutional context can be surmised exactly. The author is the serving state governor for Alaska on the cusp of stepping from office: two years after her failed run for the vice-presidency she is in search of a new role, but a role that (at the time) looks likely to involve some relationship with the rising Tea Party movement. *America by Heart* does not emulate the conspicuously general kind of reflection aimed at by either Burke or Maistre, and the genre known in American politics as the senator’s book discloses the standards for judgment. Even the sympathetic reader with prior knowledge of Palin will be primed for a bad book: she writes in the wake of a disastrous showing in the televised election debates of 2008.⁹⁵ But, in fact, despite some presentational quirks – such as a large typeset – the

⁹²Ibid., p. 12.

⁹³Ibid., pp. 32, 36.

⁹⁴Sarah Palin, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith and Flag* (New York: Broadside Books, 2013); Palin, *Going Rogue: An American Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁹⁵Mitchell S. McKinney, Leslie A. Rill and Rebekah G. Watson, ‘Who Framed Sarah Palin? Viewer Reactions to the 2008 Vice Presidential Debate’, *American Behavioural Scientist* 55:3 (2011), pp. 212–231.

formal organization of *America by Heart* adheres to the classical rhetorical arrangement quite faithfully.

America by Heart begins with a strong exordium: ‘An American Awakening’. This is heavy on what scholars of rhetoric call actualization.⁹⁶ Palin recounts her speaking tours across the country – in particular, the people she has met – and, in the process, constructs a vivid frame through which the reader will be led to filter all forthcoming messages. Although, in rhetoric, it can be standard to use all affective means to showcase personality, the extent to which this author relies on emotion and not rationality to do her persuading for her is acutely apparent. That grows into the schmaltziness of her prose, hence the bridge from the front matter to main body: ‘This is my America, from my heart, and by my heart. I give it now to my children and grandchildren, and to yours, so that they will always know what it was like in American when people were free’.⁹⁷ Actualization combined with schmaltz means that what could be plausible ‘populism’ tropes are regularly deployed: ‘the little guy’, ‘normal Americans’, ‘patriotic indignation’.⁹⁸ Although, under closer scrutiny, it transpires these meanings will not be automatically transparent to the analyst.

Narration seems enclosed within chapter one and centres on the United States Constitution. It is headed ‘We the People’ but, in referencing the *Declaration of Independence*, ought to be coded not to populism, but to libertarian and biblical categories. This chapter clarifies the intended remit of the book: to demonstrate the decline of the ‘nation’ in all fields that has accelerated since 2008 (that is, since Republican defeat to Obama and Biden). Overall, where discussion in *America by Heart* pushes to the greatest level of generality is when Palin is evoking the nation’s founding to promulgate themes associated with American exceptionalism. Palin emits an avowed commitment to ‘conservatism’ (the sub-heading for her conclusion is ‘Commonsense Constitutional Conservatism’), but it could be observed that while promulgating American exceptionalism she often tramples on conservative shibboleths, because she invokes – not decries – grand abstractions: particularly ‘freedom’. She makes this predilection for abstraction roughly compatible with schmaltz: ‘if you love freedom, thank a vet’. Nevertheless, ambiguity about the reaction/ conservatism boundary is implied in the selection of fields of national life for focused discussion. These are largely normal and mainstream to American conservatism, and what is special is only the focus on family and strong women. The other topics are the military; the nation; self-reliance; religion in the private sphere; and religion in the public sphere. Intermittently, Palin gestures to standing on the wrong side of History, when she returns to ‘big government’, making that into the antithesis of the Constitution – ‘our true north’ – and, more often than not, trying to document why its encroachment is not only undesirable and imprudent, but potentially fatal, for America.⁹⁹

The eight chapters of the main body survey American life by the fields identified and one of the overwhelming senses the reader picks up is of heavy repetition. Observed closely, the organization of the material carries some repetition in itself. Each main chapter tweaks a multi-purpose argument, executed in the exact same series of steps: anecdotal evidence from Palin’s own life; the lapse from standards of excellence in a given field

⁹⁶Cockcroft and Cockcroft, op. cit., pp. 61–66.

⁹⁷*America by Heart*, p. xii; italics added.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. xiii, x.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. xiv.

of national life; the celebration of a particular national figure said to have been the last in whom excellence was embodied. Repetition is equally manifest at the precise level of argumentation. *America by Heart* has an anthology feel to it because, in seeking to corroborate decline, the author quotes – and quotes persistently. The material quoted from richly varies from the low-brow (putatively ‘populist’?) – such as films with a right-wing message – to the rarefied (unlikely philosophical inspirations, such as Plato and Tocqueville). Equally interesting, the quotations are meandering. Each is allowed to drag on several sentences longer than a more assured writer would allow, some exceeding two pages, and the effect on the reader seems more distracting than reinforcing, giving the impression of an author losing control of her discourse.

After the lapse of proof into mercurial repetition, the epilogue is, however, tidy. Because the Constitution is the explicit topic revisited, it completes the book in an aesthetically satisfying arc. The reader is taken back to where he or she started from.

Crippled America

Donald Trump’s *Crippled America* was published in 2015 – prefiguring his shock presidential election victory in November 2016 – and, like the Palin text, is preceded by an author’s better-known autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*.¹⁰⁰ In this case the sample text is also preceded by a previous election-time book, *Time to Get Tough*, dating back to an aborted Trump campaign for the presidency in 2012.¹⁰¹ *Crippled America* is a relatively short book: only 176 pages. By genre, the text emulates the recognized model of the policy primer, albeit doubling-up as a campaign text. The subtitle echoes the campaign slogan: ‘How to Make America Great Again’.

An exordium (here labelled a ‘preface’) is bare at just six fast-paced pages, but is simple enough to grasp: ‘You Gotta Believe’. Already it exhibits the strong preference for the one-sentence paragraph. The reactionary self-understanding by reference to History is evident: ‘... we are not in a joyous situation right now. We’re in a situation where *we* have to go back to work to make America great again’.¹⁰² By comparison with the Palin text, conscious anger is transmitted with even sparser refinement, since the prose is allowed to spill out on the page in great haste:

Some readers may be wondering why the picture we used on the cover of this book is so angry and mean looking. I had some beautiful pictures taken in which I had a big smile on my face ... But I decided [that] wasn’t appropriate ...¹⁰³

A narration could be seen as corresponding to the first chapter of seventeen: ‘Winning Again’. The case summarized is simple: ‘we need a government that is committed to winning and has experience in winning’.¹⁰⁴ Within closer analysis, what could be interesting to pursue is that the early part of *Crippled America* almost completing ignores the conventional rhetorical advice to set a tone by abjuring boastfulness for humility: ‘I have proven everybody wrong. EVERYBODY!’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰Donald J. Trump, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (New York, NY: Threshold, 2015); Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (London: Arrow Books, 2016 [orig. 1987]).

¹⁰¹Trump, *Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again* (Washington, DC: Regency, 2012).

¹⁰²Trump, *Crippled America*, p. ix.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 5.

Participation in the policy primer genre is identifiable in the allocation of main body chapters to discrete policy areas. This creates expectations of what the book ought to be doing: namely, outlining a ‘policy platform’ so that plans cohere, so that practical initiatives can be sketched. However, even on a generous estimate, those expectations are confounded entirely. Within the chapters, achieving digression is quite a feat, since *prima facie* there is little available space to do so: no chapter is more than twelve pages maximum. Haste continues to be on show again in impatience to get to the end of reasoning chains, to follow up whatever loose policy proposal has been described with an inflection on the ubiquitous tagline (‘our healthcare will be *well* again’, ‘we can make America *beautiful* again’). There is also a default course for chapters to divert quickly into attack (unless veering off instead into bombastic self-praise): the education chapter, for instance, turns to blaming ‘the teacher unions’ after just five pages. Outside the individual chapters, digression manifests in whole extended phases, often lasting over several chapters at a time. Chapter nine – ‘Nice Guys Can Finish First’ – is a short diversion, which departs from the description of policy ambitions to take issue with the alleged myth that Trump is not a *bona fide* Republican (which itself creates a contradiction with the delight taken elsewhere in book in perceived ostracism from ‘establishment’ conservatism).¹⁰⁶ The most extended digression occurs in the series of chapters from thirteen to fifteen (‘Values’, ‘A New Game in Town’, ‘Treating the Media Dollars and Sense’), which scan as thin-skinned responses to perceived slights by ‘my critics’,¹⁰⁷ or the unprompted pursuit of grudges. The line that Trump walks between reaction and conservatism tends to feature mostly when the book is laying archetypically conservative emphasis on either evidence or basic economics. As such, possible exceptions to weak demonstration are the two chapters on the construction industry and tax reform, where in both cases some amount of fiscal reasoning is offered.

At surface level, an epilogue is shrewd, because by sub-heading the campaign slogan is re-worked for a final time, performing recapitulation in the process: ‘Making America Great Again’. That a personal anecdote is to the fore in closing is also suitable. Trump compacts a tale of his very first construction project, which is meanwhile a rhetorical synecdoche, because the ‘dying building’ Trump he took on in 1974 represents America circa 2016. But within the anecdote, the self-congratulation – to the point of hubris – is incongruous. And, as in Maistre’s *Considerations*, crisp ending runs the risk of being squandered. The ending of *Crippled America* included superfluous appendix material once more. Seventeen smaller-print pages, under the title ‘About the Author’, assiduously detail past business accomplishments.

Conclusion

My words in conclusion are mainly devoted to consolidating the new research direction proposed. As such, I re-iterate that the category of political reaction is generally underplayed, but that given the challenge posed by contemporary realities to both scholarship and the quality of civic life, there would seem good grounds for putting it to greater work. Populism is not an awful category – and reaction is not a failsafe one – but, in

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 98, 99.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. xi.

the least, some of the problems experienced by populism theories offer lessons for reviving the theory of reaction in a convincing way. My argument for re-envisioning reaction as a second-order ideology is premised on the recurrence of the reactionary admission to standing upon the ‘wrong side of History’. This admission sounds surprising, but is not illusory, nor reducible to ironic appropriation in the face of ‘progressivist’ taunts. For why would reactionaries *tell other reactionaries* that they stand on the History’s wrong side? The main emphasis of the present contribution has been methodological. The practical groundwork for an ideological theory of reaction has been laid out in a further proposition concerning an archetypal reactionary communication form: the diatribe. In a two-step process, a model of the diatribe might help investigators to determine exactly which texts to invest time reading closely and, moreover, how to do so. A rapid application of this method already yields a tentative finding. This is that some texts published in the names of Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, Sarah Palin and Donald Trump elicit recurrent criss-crossing between positions that are *prima facie* reactionary and conservative. Are predictions feasible? Tempting fate is rarely wise, but in the context of Western conservative parties that appear to be undergoing rightward shifts, this prospect could actually be quite sanguine. For while a phenomenon of ideological adjustment is quite familiar in ideology studies – and implies movement in a single direction only – there may also be a phenomenon of ideological vacillation worth appreciating, with special application to the ideological Right, and whereby changes are both transient and occur in multiple directions.

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Notes on contributor

Richard Shorten is Senior Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Birmingham, UK. His research focuses on the history of modern political ideas, particularly in twentieth-century Europe. He is author of *Modernism and Totalitarianism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). His work has also appeared in such journals as *History of Political Thought*, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Political Studies Review*, *Contemporary Politics*, *Cold War History*, *The European Legacy* and *European History Quarterly*; as well as, in particular, *Journal of Political Ideologies*.