

Our Reactionary Age

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Hope, said the philosopher Francis Bacon, is a good breakfast, but an ill supper. Only a quarter-century ago, hope was an active force in world politics. The Cold War ended peacefully, and functioning constitutional democracies took root in Eastern Europe. The European Union was formally established, and membership was steadily extended eastward. The Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians were signed, and Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa after spending three decades in prison.

Do we even remember what hope looked like? Today, politics worldwide is being driven instead by anger, despair and resentment. And above all, nostalgia. “Make X Great Again” is the demagogic slogan of our time, and not just with the presidential candidacy of Donald J. Trump in the United States. What is political Islamism but the violent translation of a fantasy of return, in this case to an imagined era of religious purity and military might? Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India made his career by propagating Hindutva, a fanciful Hindu nationalism that extols Indian civilization before the arrival of Muslims. Far-right parties across Europe traffic in similar imagined pasts.

We live in a reactionary age. Revolutionaries traffic in hope. They believe, and wish others to believe, that a radical break with the past is possible and that it will inaugurate a new era of human experience. Reactionaries believe that such a break has already occurred and has been disastrous. While to the untrained eye the river of time seems to flow as it always has, the reactionary sees the debris of paradise drifting past his eyes. The revolutionary sees the radiant future, and it electrifies him. The reactionary thinks of the past in all its splendor, and he, too, is electrified. He is, he thinks, the guardian of what actually happened, not the prophet of what might be. This explains the strangely exhilarating despair that courses through reactionary literature and political rhetoric, the palpable sense of mission. As the editors of the right-leaning magazine *National Review* put it in its very first issue, the mission is to stand “athwart history, yelling Stop.”

Reactionaries are not conservatives. This is the first thing to be understood about them. Conservatives have always seen society as a kind of inheritance we receive and are responsible for. The healthiest way to bring about change, the conservative believes, is through consultation and slow transformations in custom and tradition, not by announcing bold reform programs or inventing supposedly inalienable individual rights. But the conservative is also reconciled to the fact that history never stands still and that we are only passing through. Conservatism seeks to instill the humble thought that history moves us forward, not the other way around. And that radical attempts to master it through sheer will bring disaster.

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Reactionaries reject this conservative outlook. They are, in their way, just as radical as revolutionaries and just as destructive. Reactionary stories always begin with a happy, well-ordered state where people willingly shared a common destiny. Then alien ideas promoted by intellectuals and outsiders — writers, journalists, professors, foreigners — undermined that harmony. (The betrayal of elites is central to every reactionary myth.) Soon the entire society, even the common people, were taken in. Only those who have preserved memories of the old ways — the reactionaries themselves — see what happened. Whether the society reverses direction or rushes to its ultimate doom depends entirely on their resistance.

Nor are reactionaries to be found only on the right. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of revolutionary hopes for the post-colonial world, the European left has traded the rhetoric of hope for that of nostalgia. Nostalgia for its own past power. The story the reactionary left tells itself begins with the revolutions of centuries past, the uprisings, the general strikes. Then, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, came the fall. Who is to blame? Once again: intellectuals — in this case an international cabal of “neoliberal” economists. They somehow managed to persuade governments and formerly working-class voters that to get rich is glorious. And when the riches never arrived, racist politicians persuaded those voters to blame immigrants and minorities. This illusion can be dispelled only if we Make the Left Great Again — though what exactly a revived left will do remains a mystery. Not one of the new anti-globalization parties in Europe — Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, the Five Star Movement in Italy — has put forward a remotely plausible program for the future.

There is a connection between the popularity of these parties, the British vote to leave the European Union and the enthusiasm for Mr. Trump in Middle America. Economic globalization and the paralysis of democratic institutions has left ordinary people in Western societies feeling disenfranchised. So has the fact that no party or movement across the political spectrum has offered a plausible vision of the future based on present realities, which change with increasing speed. To live a modern life anywhere in the world today, subject to perpetual social and technological transformations, is to experience the psychological equivalent of permanent revolution. Anxiety in the face of this process is now a universal experience, which is why reactionary ideas attract adherents around the world who share little except their sense of historical betrayal.

Every major social transformation leaves behind a fresh Eden that can serve as the object of somebody’s nostalgia. And the reactionaries of our time have discovered that nostalgia can be a powerful political motivator, perhaps even more powerful than hope. Hopes can be disappointed. Nostalgia is irrefutable.