

Book Review

COREY ROBIN, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011, xiii + 290 p., index.

In October 2011, only weeks after the publication of this book, Republican presidential hopeful Herman Cain perfectly illustrated the blunt nature of contemporary U.S. conservatism. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, in reaction to the Occupy Wall Street movement, Cain told protesters that “if you don’t have a job, and you’re not rich, blame yourself.” Although it does not count as “theory,” this quote illustrates what Robin sees as the nature of conservatism that he defines as “the theoretical voice of the animus against the agency of the subordinate classes” (p. 7). For this left-leaning professor from City University of New York (CUNY), conservatism “provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity. Submission is their first duty, agency, the prerogative of the elite” (p. 7). Although Cain is hardly a conservative luminary, his quote points to what Robin depicts as the reactionary nature of conservatism, which emerges as a backlash against emancipatory social movements (e.g., unionism and feminism) that challenge existing public and private hierarchies. Although it adapts to the changing nature of its enemies on the left, for Robin, only a long-term historical and comparative perspective on conservatism allows us to grasp the ideological unity of the political right. According to him, this unity actually lies in its regressive nature: “not all counterrevolutionaries are conservative (. . .) but all conservatives are, in a way or another, counterrevolutionary” (p. 34). Considering this, U.S. conservatism, far from being “exceptional” as scholars had previously argued, is embedded in the same ideological logic as European conservatism. By constantly returning to the work of its founders—Joseph the Maistre and, especially, Edmund Burke, Robin draws striking parallels between these long-dead, European conservatives and key figures of today’s conservative movement in the United States (the book’s subtitle is “Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin” for a reason, although Palin herself is only mentioned on a few occasions).

Ironically, although the unity of conservatism is the boldest argument of *The Reactionary Mind*, the book itself lacks unity, as it consists of a loosely assembled collection of previously published essays. After a lengthy and fascinating introductory chapter, Part I of the book, appropriately

titled “Profiles in Reaction,” deals with figures ranging from Hobbes to Ayn Rand and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The inclusion of some of these characters sometimes feels arbitrary, and transitions from chapter to chapter are often missing altogether. Even more problematic, the core argument of the book about the unity of conservatism is not backed in a systematic way through this succession of essays. As for the second and last main part of the book, it deals with the conservative fascination for violence, from the French Revolution to the events of September 11, 2001, which helped rejuvenate the hawkish, violence-prone, and oppositional logic of modern conservatism.

Although this book lacks coherence, it is extremely well-written and provocative, and it does provide valuable insight into the nature of conservatism, past and present. The discussion about the ambiguous relationship between capitalism and modern conservatism is especially interesting, because it seems counterintuitive, at least to some readers. The systematic analysis of Burke is especially compelling, as Robin knows his work inside and out. Certainly, his take on Burke’s political and aesthetic ideas is most insightful, as it does shed light on key ideological components of modern conservatism that remain at play to this day in the United States and elsewhere. Talking about “elsewhere,” although it is much less coherent and systematic than Albert O. Hirschman’s masterful *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991), the comparative analysis of conservatism at the heart of *The Reactionary Mind* is refreshing, especially coming from a U.S. political scientist.

The question I had in mind while reading Robin’s new book concerns the very issue of comparative research and its contribution to the debate about the nature of conservatism in advanced industrial societies. For instance, what about Canada, a country where Stephen Harper is now at the helm of a Conservative majority government? Clearly, Canadian conservatives are influenced by their U.S. counterparts, both politically and ideologically. In this context, reading Robin’s book should prove helpful to political sociologists who seek to grasp the nature of the conservative project in Canada, and understand how it compares with the one witnessed south of the border. If Robin is right (pun intended) and conservatism is grounded in the very same reactionary logic across time and space, then the study of Canadian conservatives could adopt a truly historical and global perspective, without losing track of ideological and institutional differences between countries.

Reference

Hirschman, A.O. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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