

# READINGS

[Essay]

## THE PARTY OF LOSS

By Corey Robin, from “Conservatism and Counter-revolution from Burke to Palin,” published in the Summer issue of *Raritan*. Robin is the author of *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*.

Ever since Edmund Burke invented conservatism as an idea, the conservative has styled himself a man of prudence and moderation. Yet the political efforts that have roused the conservative to his most profound reflections—the reactions against the French and Bolshevik revolutions, the defense of slavery and Jim Crow, the attack on social democracy and the welfare state, the serial backlashes against the New Deal, the Great Society, civil rights, feminism, and gay rights—have been anything but that. There is a not-so-subterranean strain of imprudence and immoderation, risk-taking and adventurism, running through that tradition. Conservatism is an ideology of reaction, but that reactionary imperative presses conservatism to critique and reconfigure the old regime, to make privilege popular and to transform a tottering old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses: a new old regime, one could say, that brings the energy of the street to the antique inequalities of a dilapidated estate.

It is hardly provocative to say that conservatism arose in reaction to the French Revolution, but if we look more carefully at two emblematic voices of that reaction—Burke and Joseph de Maistre—we find a surprising antip-

athy, bordering on contempt, for the old regime they claim as their cause. The opening chapters of Maistre’s *Considerations on France* are an unrelenting assault on the *ancien régime*’s three pillars—the aristocracy, the church, and the monarchy—which he dismisses with a line from Racine: “Now see the sad fruits your faults produced,/Feel the blows you have yourselves induced.”

In Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he describes Marie Antoinette as a “delightful vision . . . glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy.” Burke takes her beauty as a symbol of the loveliness of the old regime, in which feudal manners and mores “made power gentle” and “by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society.” But beauty, Burke writes in his *Sublime and Beautiful*, is always a sign of decadence; it arouses pleasure, which gives way to indifference or leads to a total dissolution of the self. “Beauty acts,” he writes, “by relaxing the solids of the whole system.” It’s this relaxation and dissolution of bodies—physical, social, political bodies—that make beauty such a potent symbol and agent of degeneration and death.

What these two opening statements suggest is that the greatest enemy of the old regime is neither the revolutionary nor the reformer; it is the old regime itself, or, to be more precise, the defenders of the old regime. They simply lack the ideological wherewithal to press the principles of the old regime with vigor, clarity, and purpose. They have grown fat and complacent, so roundly enjoying the privileges of their position that they cannot see the coming catastrophe. When the abolitionists began pressing their own principles,

John C. Calhoun drove himself into a rage over the easy living and willful cluelessness of his comrades on the plantation. "All we want is concert," he pleaded with his fellow Southerners, to "unite with zeal and energy in repelling approaching dangers." But, he went on, "I dare not hope that anything I can say will arouse the South to a due sense of danger; I fear it is beyond the power of the mortal voice to awaken it in time from the fatal security into which it has fallen."

**A**lthough conservatives are hostile to the goals of the left, they are often its best students, learning from the revolutions they oppose. Sometimes their studies are self-conscious and strategic, as they look to the left for ways to bend new vernaculars, or new media, to their suddenly delegitimated aims. Fearful that the philosophes had taken control of popular opinion in France, reactionary theologians in the middle of the eighteenth century stopped writing abstruse disquisitions for one another and began to produce Catholic agitprop, which was distributed through the very networks that brought enlightenment to the French people. They spent vast sums funding essay contests (like those in which Rousseau made his name) to reward writers who wrote accessible and popular defenses of religion. Pioneers of the Southern Strategy in the Nixon Administration, to cite a more recent example, understood that after the civil rights movement the G.O.P. could no longer make simple appeals to white racism. As White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman noted in his diary, Nixon "emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the Blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to." Republican strategist Lee Atwater spelled out the system's elements more clearly:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it.

More recently still, David Horowitz has encouraged conservative students "to use the language that the left has deployed so effectively on behalf of its own agendas. Radical professors have created a 'hostile learning environment' for conservative students. . . . The university should be an 'inclusive' and intellectually 'diverse' community."

At other times, the education of the conservative is unknowing, happening, as it were, behind

his back. By resisting and thus engaging with the progressive argument day after day, he comes to be influenced, often in spite of himself, by the very movement he opposes. After years of opposing the women's movement, for example, Phyllis Schlafly seemed genuinely incapable of conjuring the pre-feminist view of women as deferential wives and mothers. Instead, she celebrated the activist "power of the positive woman." As if borrowing a page from *The Feminine Mystique*, she railed against the meaninglessness and lack of fulfillment among American women, only she blamed these ills on feminism rather than sexism.

But what the conservative ultimately learns from his opponents is the power of agency and the potency of the mass. The trauma of revolution teaches conservatives that men and women, whether through willed acts of force or some other exercise of human volition, can order social relationships and political time. Whereas the conservatives' predecessors in the old regime thought of inequality as a naturally occurring phenomenon, an inheritance passed on from generation to generation, their encounter with revolution shows them that the revolutionaries were right after all: inequality is a human creation. And if it can be uncreated by men and women, it can be re-created by men and women. Coming out of his confrontation with the revolution, the conservative voices the kind of affirmation of agency one finds in a 1957 editorial from William F. Buckley's *National Review*: "The central question that emerges" from the civil rights movement "is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas in which it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is Yes—the White community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race."

The revolutionary declares the Year I, and in response the conservative declares the Year Negative I. He demonstrates a belief in the power of men and women to shape history and to propel it forward—or backward. Even when the conservative claims to be preserving a present that's threatened or recovering a past that's lost, he is compelled by his own activism to confess that he's making a new beginning and creating the future. Burke took special pains to remind his comrades that whatever was rebuilt in France after the restoration would inevitably, as he put it in a letter to an émigré, "be in some measure a new thing." Or as Barry Goldwater said, "Our future, like our past, will be what we make it."

From the revolution, conservatives also develop a taste and talent for the masses, mobilizing the street for spectacular displays of power while making sure that power is never truly shared or redistributed. That is the task of right-



"Janus Mask, Nkim Village, Nigeria," a photograph by Phyllis Galembó, from *Maske*, a monograph published in October by Chris Boot. Galembó's work was on view in October at the Contemporary Arts Center, in New Orleans.

wing populism: to appeal to the mass without disrupting the power of elites or, more precisely, to harness the energy of the mass in order to reinforce or restore the power of elites. Far from being a recent innovation of the Christian right or the Tea Party movement, reactionary populism runs like a thread throughout conservative discourse from its inception. Maistre was a pioneer in the theater of mass power, imagining scenes and staging dramas in which the lowest of the low could see themselves reflected in the highest of the high. "Monarchy is," he writes, "without contradiction, the form of government that gives the most distinction to the greatest

number of persons." Ordinary people "share" in its "brilliance," though not, Maistre is careful to add, in its decisions and deliberations: "man is honored not as an agent but as a *portion* of sovereignty." When Maistre imagines the triumph of the counterrevolution, he takes care to emphasize the populist credentials of the returning monarch. The people should identify with this new king, says Maistre, because like them he has attended the "terrible school of misfortune" and suffered in the "hard school of adversity." He is "human," with humanness here connoting an almost pedestrian, and reassuring, capacity for error. He will be like them. Unlike

[Game]

## GOLDEN PARACHUTES AND LADDERS

From “News Flash” playing cards for Billionaire Tycoon, a British board game released in September. The game’s premise is: “You were once a successful business tycoon and you lost your empire in the recession.” Each player is given a “100,000k” loan and competes to become the wealthiest. Players also pick “People Cards,” which give them access to such influential figures as Judge, Mafia Boss, Politician, and Sheikh. A luxury edition of the game, made from Swedish and Italian leather, is available for almost \$8,000.

One of your oil rigs explodes, causing permanent damage to a coral reef. You are fined heavily by the government. Lose 100m.

The government launches a massive bailout plan aimed at injecting capital into the financial system. Earn 200,000k.

As tensions rise in the Middle East, your journalists are kidnapped from their armored car at gunpoint by an unknown mob. Lose 20m.

Hijackers take over a cargo ship; your products have been stolen. Lose 50,000k.

New green-energy research is announced and oil prices plunge. Lose 50m.

You are being investigated for tax fraud. Miss your next turn.

The global rich list has been published, and you have won first place in your sector. Your company’s share price increases. Earn 100m.

Your CEO is sentenced to eight years in prison for taking 2.4m in bribes from military contractors in exchange for government contracts. Lose any five entrepreneur businesses.

Over 30,000 auto workers strike when contract negotiations over wages and benefits reach a stalemate. Lose 50m.

Fed cuts interest rates in an attempt to bring stability to the economy, which has been rocked by turbulence in the housing and financial markets. Earn 90,000k.

Military police shoot at crowds in a demonstration and arrest monks. The brutality of the attacks sparks international outrage. Lose Politician or 50m.

Donkey flu has killed thousands; pharmacy orders have shot up. Earn 200,000k.

Tsunami strikes and your private island sinks into the ocean. Lose private island resort and 200m.

You get divorced. Lose half your cash.

his predecessors, he will know it, which “is a great deal.”

But to appreciate fully the inventiveness of right-wing populism, we have to look to the master class of the Old South. The slaveholder created a quintessentially American form of democratic feudalism, turning the white majority into a lordly class, sharing in the privileges and prerogatives of governing the slave class. Slaveholders are “not an exclusive aristocracy,” wrote Daniel Hundley in *Social Relations in Our Southern States*. “Every free white man in the whole Union has just as much right to become an Oligarch.” This was not just propaganda: by 1860, James Oakes reminds us in *The Ruling Race*, there were 400,000 slaveholders in the South, making the American master class one of the most democratic in the world. In the words of Calhoun: “With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich,

belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.”

**T**hese populist currents can help us make sense of a final element of conservatism: its appeal to and reliance on outsiders. Maistre was from Savoy, Burke from Ireland. Alexander Hamilton was born out of wedlock in Nevis and rumored to be part black. Disraeli was a Jew, as are virtually all the neoconservatives who helped transform the G.O.P. from a cocktail party in Darien to the party of Scalia, D’Souza, Gonzales, and Yoo. Conservatism not only has depended on outsiders but has also seen itself as the voice of the outsider. From Burke’s cry that “the gallery is in the place of the house” to Buckley’s complaint that the modern conservative is “out of place,” the conservative has served as a tribune for the displaced, his movement a conveyance of their grievances. Far from being an invention of the politically correct, victimhood has been a talking point of the right ever since Burke decried the mob’s treatment of Marie Antoinette. The conservative, to be sure, speaks for a special type of victim: one who has lost something of value, as opposed to the wretched of the earth, whose chief complaint is that they never had anything to lose. His constituency is the contingently dispossessed—William Graham Sumner’s “Forgotten Man”—rather than the preternaturally oppressed. This brand of victimhood endows the conservative complaint with a more universal significance. It connects his disinheritance to an experience we all share—loss—and weaves that experience into an ideology promising that what is lost can be restored.

People on the left often fail to realize this, but conservatism does indeed speak to and for people



who have lost something. The loss may be as material as a portion of one's income or as ethereal as a sense of standing. It may be of something that was never legitimately owned in the first place. Even so, nothing is ever so cherished as that which we no longer possess. It used to be one of the great virtues of the left that it alone understood the zero-sum nature of politics, wherein the gains of one class necessarily entail the losses of another. But as that sense of conflict diminishes on the left, it has fallen to the right to remind voters that there really are losers in politics and that it is they—and only they—who speak for them. Conservatism is not the Party of Order, as Mill and others have claimed, but the Party of Loss.

The chief aim of the loser is not preservation or protection but recovery and restoration, and that is the secret of conservatism's success. Because his losses are recent, the conservative can credibly claim that his goals are practical and achievable. He merely seeks to regain what is his; the fact that he once had it suggests he is capable of possessing it again. Whereas the left's program of redistribution raises the question of whether its beneficiaries are truly prepared to wield the powers they seek, the conservative project of restoration suffers from no such challenge. Unlike the revolutionary, moreover, who faces the nearly impossible task of empowering the powerless, the conservative asks his followers to do more of what they have always done. As a result, his counter-revolution will not require the same violence and disruption that the revolution has visited on the country. "Four or five persons, perhaps," writes Maistre, "will give France a king."

For some, perhaps many, in the conservative movement, this knowledge comes as a source of relief: their sacrifice will be small, their reward great. For others, it is a source of bitter disappointment. To this small subset of activists and militants, the battle is all. To learn that it soon will be over and will not require so much from them is enough to prompt a complex of despair: disgust over the shabbiness of their effort, grief over the disappearance of their foe, anxiety over their enforced early retirement. As Irving Kristol complained after the end of the Cold War, the defeat of the Soviet Union "deprived" conservatives like himself "of an enemy," and "in politics, being deprived of an enemy is a very serious matter. You tend to get relaxed and dispirited. Turn inward." Depression haunts conservatism as surely as does great wealth. But again, far from diminishing the appeal of conservatism, this darker dimension only enhances it. Onstage, the conservative waxes Byronic, moodily surveying the sum of his losses before an audience of the lovelorn and the starstruck. Offstage, and out of sight, his managers quietly compile the sum of their gains.

[Conversation]

## STATUS UPDATE

*From a February Facebook chat between Christopher Winfield and his son Adam, an Army specialist with a Stryker Brigade Combat Team in Afghanistan. According to Army investigators, two more Afghan civilians were murdered by Spc. Winfield's platoon after the chat took place. In September, Winfield was arrested along with eleven other platoon members and has since been charged with murder in connection with the third civilian death. The conversation was obtained through Winfield's lawyer.*

ADAM WINFIELD: Hey.

CHRISTOPHER WINFIELD: What up?

A.W.: Did you read the message I sent?

C.W.: No. Just got home.

A.W.: Read it in private. I only want you and Mom to know about this right now.

C.W.: So are you in trouble now or is it over with?

A.W.: I'm not in trouble. I just lost all and any authority I had. I'm not concerned about my job right now or the promotion board. Did you not understand what I just told you what people did in my platoon?

C.W.: Murder.

A.W.: Yeah, an innocent dude. They planned and went through with it. I knew about it. Didn't believe they were going to do it. Then it happened. Pretty much the whole platoon knows about it. It's OK with all of them pretty much. Except me. I want to do something about it. The only problem is I don't feel safe here telling anyone. The guy who did it is the golden boy in the company who can never do anything wrong and it's my word against theirs.

C.W.: Was it an Afghan they killed?

A.W.: Yes. Some innocent guy about my age just farming. They made it look like the guy threw a grenade at them and mowed him down. I was on the Stryker and wasn't on the ground when it took place. But I know they did it because they told me. Everyone pretty much knows it was staged. If I say anything it's my word against everyone. There's no one in this platoon that agrees this was wrong. They all don't care.

C.W.: OK, wow, you are not in a position to say anything to anybody. You don't know who to trust. I think maybe I need to call a senator's office and talk to them without mentioning names. I don't want you to get hurt from this. Let me think this through, OK? Also, were you demoted? Or did you step down from your position?

A.W.: I stepped down. I cannot be a leader in a platoon that allows this to happen. I cannot work for my squad leader who punishes me for leaving a Stryker unlocked and gives high