
the very least he has removed some empty armor that prevented our seeing the principles for which we all fight.

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Richard Shorten: *The Ideology of Political Reactionaries*. (New York: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xiii, 270.)

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As I sat down to review Richard Shorten's *The Ideology of Political Reactionaries*, it happened that Kanye West had just completed another explosively bigoted interview. "I like Hitler," West announced to conspiracy podcaster Alex Jones and his millions of listeners. "The Jewish media has made us feel like the Nazis and Hitler have never offered anything of value to the world."

While he does not figure in the book, it is worth considering Kanye West as an exemplar of the reactionary style as described by Shorten. There is the self-celebrating posture of the brave teller of "cancelable" truths; the conspiracy talk that binds him and his audience as fellow seekers of forbidden knowledge; and, above all, the signature rhetorical mode of the rant or diatribe, a stream of aggrieved consciousness punctuated by digressions, repetitions, and enmities. As Shorten argues, it is not coincidence that reaction and ranting so often go hand-in-hand. Engaging in diatribe is not simply what reactionaries *do*; it is closer to what reactionaries *are*. Reaction does not simply *have* a rhetoric; *it is* a rhetoric.

The Ideology of Political Reactionaries makes a sustained and well-supported case that political reaction is best understood through a rhetorical lens. Rather than an upsurge of the "authoritarian personality," a manifestation of regressive social forces, or a straightforward political philosophy, reaction is more accurately conceived as a co-occurring package of appeals and modes of expression. For Shorten, the "worldly analysis of rhetoric" (19) offers advantages that other analytical lenses do not. Most importantly, it treats reaction as a political stance that its exponents hold sincerely, without exaggerating its conceptual coherence. For the potential convert, "reaction requires no co-optation into conceptual units of belief at all, rather simply rhetoric" (69). And this sort of rhetorical flatness is relevant for our understanding of reaction, "more so than, say, in the interpretation of the liberal or socialist imaginations" (14).

Which rhetorical features constitute reaction? Most saliently, Shorten argues that reactionaries have consistently made use of their own distinctive

versions of Aristotle's *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. These constitute the rhetorical "pillars" that "structure reaction by running right the way through it, in any and every guise" (22). The reactionary *logos* is *decadence* ("the present is ill-fated: we are going badly off track") (22); the reactionary *ethos* is *conspiracy* (History has been driven off track by hidden wrongdoers, through whose exposure the reactionary writer wins credibility); and the reactionary *pathos* is *indignation* (a particularly embittered and simmering anger that is often pleasurable to vent). The *diatribe* is the prototypical mode of reactionary expression: "a form of political communication arranged into each of the conventional rhetorical phases . . . but so that proof is, on the one hand, punctuated by regular digression and, on the other, extended significantly by recourse to blame" (20). This strikes me as accurate: if one is indignant about the fact that a shadowy cabal has driven History off its proper track, the apposite thing to do is to rant about it.

The body of Shorten's book is dedicated to a close reading of reactionary figures' signature diatribes. To show the rhetoric of indignation at work, Shorten draws on a wide range of reactionaries: Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, Sarah Palin, Donald Trump, Adolf Hitler, Éric Zemmour, Joe McCarthy, Anders Breivik, and Nigel Farage. While readers may quibble with the choice of some of these figures (and here I feel compelled to stick up for Burke, whose Whiggish reformism and critique of empire are overshadowed in this book by a focus on the more florid passages of the *Reflections*), Shorten makes clear that he does not want to imply a moral equivalence between his subjects. Rather, their writing shares in a rhetorical family resemblance.

The Ideology of Political Reactionaries is at its best when it attends to the rhetorical interstices of its case studies—the fleeting moments that are likely to get shorter shrift in a more conceptually oriented approach. This attention helps Shorten extract important insights from the lack of section or chapter breaks in Burke's *Reflections*, from the glowering photo on the cover of Trump's 2015 presidential campaign book, or from Zemmour's digressions on the state of French soccer. Shorten's approach leads him to some counter-intuitive, yet insightful, findings about political reaction. Among these are the claims that reactionaries' orientation toward history is better understood as a kind of retro-futurism rather than nostalgia; that reactionaries are more prone to "fetishize facts" than engage in "post-truth" politics (216); and that the boundary between conservatism and reaction is inherently porous.

Still, I am not fully persuaded by the book's overarching theoretical framework. Shorten privileges the rhetorical over the sociological analysis of reaction largely because of the latter's "resistance towards imagining reactionary beliefs as genuine" (8). But without an analysis of the social forces served by reaction, it is difficult to offer a full account of reaction's distinctiveness. For instance, the *Communist Manifesto* is anything but a reactionary text. Yet it seems intuitively wrong to me to locate the crucial difference between Marx and Engels and one of Shorten's reactionaries in their mode of

expression—in their choice to write a *manifesto* instead of a *diatribe*—rather than in the concrete political and social stakes of their project. It ought to be possible to center the question, *Whom do reactionaries want to empower, and for what purposes?* while still conceiving of their beliefs as genuinely held.

Similarly, Shorten objects to the conceptual treatment of reaction on the grounds that it is too self-contradictory to qualify as a political philosophy proper. But I am not convinced that reaction is distinctively self-contradictory in comparison to other ideologies. If it is self-contradictory as an entire body of thought, how can we be assured that this finding is not simply an effect of the selection of certain texts for the reactionary canon? If the problem is reactionaries' internal self-contradiction, I do not think that this book offers sufficient evidence that they are more self-contradictory than any other group of writers and politicians engaged in active polemical struggle.

By treating reaction as essentially rhetorical, Shorten is able to criticize it, quite effectively, as rhetoric. His analysis of *Mein Kampf* is able to show, for instance, why “at least two manoeuvres of the epilogue seem rhetorically mistaken” (132). And he is able to conclude the book with a judgment on the ultimate “banality of reaction” (263). But if reaction really is rhetoric—the use of words and arguments to win and exercise power—then this mode of detached critique may be necessary, yet not sufficient, for grappling with it. It is helpful to be able to point out where *Mein Kampf* is rhetorically mistaken. But it is also helpful to point out where it is stupid and evil. If those are not appropriate terms for use in a scholarly monograph, they are appropriate terms for confronting reaction on its own ground. The more we are convinced that reaction is essentially rhetorical, the more the response to it will need to be rhetorical, as well.

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Paolo Costa: *The Post-Secular City: The New Secularization Debate* (Padeborn, Germany: Brill Schöningh, 2022.)

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This is an incredibly learned book by an author who has been publishing on the philosophy and sociology of religion for years, as is evident from the numerous essays he has contributed to many journals across different languages. It is without question one of the most comprehensive, synoptic, insightful, and balanced overviews in the recent flurry of books dealing