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6.5

COREY ROBIN

From *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*

This leftist critique of Donald Trump by Robin is more than merely a reaction to Trump's policies. Robin cites the many contradictions within Trump's own rhetoric but also between Trump's rhetoric and traditional conservatism. Trump, it is argued, is an odd conservative, relying on some of the core ideas of contemporary American conservatism but ultimately distorting them to harken an older version centered around Trump's unique style and career history. Trump, Robin argues, ultimately leans on the old-fashioned, muscular version of conservatism as opposed to the more modern, pro-capitalist version.

But in the desert you shall be invincible and shall achieve the goal.

—Arnold Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*

Inconsistency has long been [Donald] Trump's style.¹ But where Trump's critics seize on that inconsistency as evidence of his unique liabilities, yet another instance of the difference between him and his respectable predecessors on the right, a happy avowal of contradiction has been a feature of the conservative tradition since the beginning. Originally, that avowal assumed a tonier form: as a counter to the simpleminded rationalism that was supposed to animate the left.² Against the belief that politics and society could be reduced to and made consistent with the austere rules of logic and reason, the conservative sought what Walter Bagehot called, in a different vein, "truth as a succession of perpetual oscillations, like the negative and positive signs of an alternate series, in which you were constantly more or less denying or affirming the same proposition."³ The capacity to inhabit the twin poles of a proposition and its negation, without attempting to reconcile or overcome them, helped one appreciate and preserve the subtle textures of society. A complex social order, layered by centuries of submission and rule, would be ruined—made smaller, more tractable, less grand—by the leveling reason of the left.

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From Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Trump neither knows nor nods to this tradition. Yet as he ambles from one contradiction to the next, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that his indifference to consistency, his refusal to bow before the god of the flip-flop, is part of his appeal on the right. It advertises the image of the non-stuffed shirt that he, like so many conservatives before him, has long cultivated.⁴ "Most people are surprised by the way I work," he says in *The Art of the Deal*. "I play it very loose. . . . You can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops."⁵ Trump doesn't need to make things tidy and neat. He's not afraid of a little chaos or disorder. He's also not afraid to give offense. He's as willing to defy the norms of political correctness as he is the rule of reason; those norms are a limitation on freedom as constraining as any socialist design.⁶ Like George W. Bush, whose cowboy affect inspired the gushing title "Rebel in Chief," Trump plays the part of the happy buccaneer, forever impolitic, thumbing his nose at the prissy professor of principle—a part that invokes the right's age-old hostility to political arithmetic and moral geometry.⁷ "Sometimes," as Trump says, "it pays to be a little wild."⁸



Trump . . . is no mere carbon copy of his predecessors. In at least two respects he has revised the right's script. First, Trump reflects a tension between two visions on the right: what we might call the political and the economic. One vision prizes heroism, glory, and elite action, and is associated with the battlefield, high politics, and the hard affairs of state. The other celebrates the market and trade, the accumulation of wealth and exchange of commodities, and is associated with unfettered capitalism. The conflict between the warrior and the businessman is an old one, predating the rise of the right and capitalism.⁹ But since the eighteenth century, that conflict has produced on the right an intense ambivalence about capitalism. One side of the right has propped up the spheres of war and high politics as antidotes to or escapes from the deadening effects of capitalism. Here, capitalism is not so much eliminated as it is downgraded, its place in society diminished in order to make room for what Nietzsche called *grosse Politik*. The other side, of which there are glimmerings in Burke and a more developed picture in Schumpeter and Hayek, has not denigrated capitalism but recast it. No longer the province of the comfortable bourgeois trader, capitalism comes to look, in this view, like the agonistic political world its early defenders and critics thought capitalism might displace. The businessman ceases to be an antidote to the warrior or the aristocrat; he becomes their sublimation.

The Cold War allowed—or forced—the right to hold these tensions between the warrior and the businessman in check. Against the backdrop of the struggle against communism abroad and welfare-state liberalism at home, the businessman became a warrior and the warrior a businessman[a].¹⁰ With the end of the Cold War, that conflation or confusion of roles became difficult to

sustain. In one precinct of the right, the market returned to its status as a deadening activity that stifled greatness, whether of the nation or the elite. In another precinct of the right, market activities were revalorized as acts of heroism by an economic class that saw itself and its work as the natural province of rule. Donald Trump hails from the second precinct, but with a twist: he suggests that its self-understanding can no longer be sustained.

Trump's second innovation upends the always-delicate relationship on the right between elite and mass, privilege and populism. Conservatism is an elitist movement of the masses, an effort to create a new-old regime that, in one way or another, makes privilege popular. Sometimes, conservatism has multiplied the ranks of privilege, creating ever-finer gradations between the worse off and the worst off. Here the model is the American firm, with its many tiers of middle and lower management.¹¹ Sometimes, conservatism has simplified those ranks into two: the white race and the black race of the white supremacist imagination. Sometimes, it has offshored society's inequalities, seeing in the people of an imperial state a unified rank of superiors, "a kind of nobility among nations" subjugating less civilized peoples abroad.¹² And sometimes it has turned elites into victims, encouraging the masses to see their abjection reflected in the higher misery of those above them. Regardless of the means, conservatism has always found a way to conscript the lower orders into its regime of lordly rule.



Trump's critics often dismiss the anti-elitism of his economic rhetoric as incidental if not irrelevant. Yet Trump's critique of plutocracy, defense of entitlements, and articulated sense of the market's wounds were among the more noteworthy rhetorical innovations of his campaign—at least with respect to recent victorious strands of the electoral right (one can find precedents for Trump's mix of racial and economic populism in the less electorally successful campaigns of Father Coughlin, George Wallace, and Pat Buchanan).¹³ If nothing else, those rhetorical innovations signal that the sun of Reaganomics—which saw in the unfettered market the answer to the political, economic, and cultural stagflation of the 1970s—no longer warms the lower orders of the right.¹⁴ It's not "morning in America," Trump declared in a recent campaign book, invoking Reagan's famous tag line from 1984; we are now "*mourning for America*."¹⁵

What these two innovations tell us is that the tensions that long buttressed the right—the countervailing pressures of the political versus the economic, elite versus mass—are no longer as taut as they once were. Those pressures don't support the movement; they don't give it the buoyancy it once had. The reason is the disappearance of the right's traditional antagonists—the freedom movements of the left, those subaltern assertions of agency and will, from the French Revolution through civil rights and women's lib, that sought individual emancipation through collective liberation and vice versa. "Conservatism does its best," the right-wing British philosopher Roger Scruton

has written, “in times of crisis.” For the right, the crisis is a dynamic and vibrant left, the challenge of movements of revolution or reform that force the right to think harder and better, to act smarter and with greater discipline and intentionality: not out of any Millian desire to get the better of an argument but out of dread necessity, the need to defend power and privilege in the face of a movement seeking their elimination. When the left is ascendant and genuinely threatening, the right gets tough, intellectually and politically; when the left is in abeyance, the right grows sclerotic and complacent, rigid and lazy. According to Hayek, the defense of the free market “became stationary when it was most influential.” It “progressed” only when it was “on the defensive.” While there are stirrings on the left—Occupy, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ movements, and the Sanders campaign—none of these movements has yet achieved sufficient velocity or institutional traction to awaken and discipline a new right that would be able to do what its predecessors did. The right’s greatest “burst of creative energy,” according to Frank Meyer, one of its leading midcentury action intellectuals, occurred “simultaneously with a continuing spread of the influence of Liberalism in the practical political sphere.”¹⁶ Without a formidable enemy on the left, without an opponent to discipline and tutor the right, the long-standing fissures of the conservative movement are allowed to deepen and expand.

■ ■ ■

Trump’s rhetoric is suffused with this conception of economic life as a struggle of the best men for power and position. Nothing provokes his ire more than the time-server, whether in the family or the firm. One of the men Trump has great admiration for is Conrad Hilton, who built a hotel empire on his own. Hilton believed “that inherited wealth destroys moral character and motivation.” Trump agrees (in theory; from his earliest years, he had a trust fund, and he campaigned against the estate tax). That is why he takes such a jaundiced view of Hilton’s son, who despite Conrad’s warnings about inheritance, came to a position of great power in his father’s industry. “It had nothing to do with merit,” says Trump; “it’s called birthright.” . . .

In business, Trump prefers to deal with “the sharpest, toughest, and most vicious people in the world. I happen to love to go up against these guys, and I love to beat them.” . . . Like the bloody battles of ancient Greece or medieval Europe, moments of economic combat belong to the more excellent, superior man. Not better in the sense of meritocratic achievement—institutional measures of worth can reward only the institution man—or in terms of an economic contribution—a new product, more jobs, higher shareholder value—but in the sense of besting another in the field of battle. Those moments reveal the “instincts” of the self. Those instincts may entail “a certain intelligence,” but more important, they reflect a driving will to overcome, to overpower, to win. There are some who have great talent but who “will never find out how great they could have been. Instead, they’ll be content to sit and watch stars perform

on television.” Such individuals “are afraid of success, afraid of making decisions, afraid of winning.” The great man has no such compunctions; he has a driving will to win, to put that greatness into effect, to show it off to the world. And that, says Trump, is not something one can learn or develop; it is “an ability you’re born with.” It is what truly belongs to the original and originating self.¹⁷

■ ■ ■

Trump is by no means the first man of the right (though he may be the first president, at least since Teddy Roosevelt) to reach that conclusion about capitalism. A great many neoconservatives found themselves stranded on the same beach after the end of the Cold War. As had many conservatives before that. Those conservatives, however, always found a redeeming vision in the state. Not the welfare state or the nanny state but The State of high politics, national greatness, imperial leadership, and war. Given the thrumming menace of Trump’s rhetoric, his impatience with routine, his fetish for pomp and love of grandeur, this state, too, would seem the natural terminus of his predilections. As Bannon said, “A country’s more than an economy. We’re a civic society.” Yet on closer inspection, the state of Trump’s imagination looks less like The State than the deals he’s not sure have added up to much.

Trump’s 2011 proto-campaign statement *Time to Get Tough*—repackaged for the 2016 campaign with a new subtitle, *Make America Great Again!*[®]—plots this trajectory to a tee. It opens on that note of wounded nationalism for which Trump has come to be famous—

Every day in business I see America getting ripped off and abused. We have become a laughingstock, the world’s whipping boy, blamed for everything, credited for nothing, given no respect.¹⁸

—and it never lets up. Across nearly 200 pages, it recounts an epoch of national humiliation, presided over by decadent leaders like Barack Obama and—shades of McCarthyites talking about Dean Acheson—his band of “cream puff ‘diplomats.’” We’re sinking like a stone, growls Trump, we come to the rest of the world “on bended knee,” Obama “practices ‘pretty please’ diplomacy,” his statements are “drenched in weakness,” China is our enemy, Obama is a traitor, we have to get tough, Let’s Make America Great Again!¹⁹ So committed is Trump to America First that, after acknowledging that no American wants to drill for oil in his backyard, he cites as yet another example of our national humiliation the fact that we allow other nations to drill in their backyards. Like George C. Scott’s General “Buck” Turgidson in *Dr. Strangelove*—“Mr. President, we must not allow . . . a mineshaft gap!”—Trump complains “the holes are going to get drilled into the planet anyway” so “we should drill them on our soil.”²⁰

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... [W]hat's remarkable about Trump's political vision is how economic it can be, especially at moments when he hews most closely to a hard image of the state. Where anti-market conservatives historically flew into the arms (in both senses) of the state as an end run around the market, Trump often sees in matters of state nothing but the transactions of the market. Money is the instrument of state power. Money is the end of state power. Anyone aspiring to wield state power should be an adept of money: success or failure in the business world is the best test of one's political mettle. Even when Trump tries to talk the language of hard power—violence, coercion, rule—he cannot avoid sliding back into the idioms of the market he knows so well.

"China is our enemy," Trump says, and "the military threat from China is gigantic." As a result, "we've got to have a president who knows how to get tough with China."²¹ Does that entail an arms race, more aggressive deployments in East Asia, nuclear brinkmanship? No, just the opposite.



At almost every step—from his opening salvo of a travel ban to his attempt to repeal Obamacare to his effort to build a wall to his budget proposal for the remainder of fiscal year 2017 and plans to overhaul the tax code—Trump's plans and purposes have been checked by opposition in the streets, the courts, the Democratic Party, and uncertainty and division within his own party.²² Less than five months into his term, his voting base—whites, men, and white men and women without college degrees—has begun to erode.²³ With the important exceptions of rolling back his predecessor's regulatory regime and pushing a punitive immigration policy—the latter being an area where all presidents have independent power, a power the last two Democrats in the White House exercised with decreasing restraint²⁴—Trump's program, thus far, has been mostly stymied. And despite Trump's campaign promise, repeated in his Inaugural Address, to govern as a new type of conservative, defending the interests of the working man, his practice has been overwhelmingly consistent with mainstream pro-business Republicanism.²⁵

NOTES

1. Michael Kruse and Noah Weiland, "Donald Trump's Greatest Self-Contradictions," *Politico* (May 5, 2016), <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/donald-trump-2016-contradictions-213869>; Inae Oh, "Watch Donald Trump Contradict Himself on Every Major Campaign Issue," *Mother Jones* (August 9, 2016), <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/donald-trump-contradicting-himself-hypocrisy-video>; David Bier, "Four Ways Trump Contradicts Himself with His New Travel Ban," *Newsweek* (March 9, 2017), <http://www.newsweek.com/four-ways-trump-contradicts-himself-his-new-travel-ban-564902>.

2. The most important statement of this position on the right remains Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991). On Oakeshott's reflections on inconsistency, see Dale Hall and Tariq Modood, "Oake-

shott and the Impossibility of Philosophical Politics," *Political Studies* 30 (June 1982), 157–76.

3. Walter Bagehot, "Intellectual Conservatism," in *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, Vol. 9 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), 254.

4. Kevin Mattson, *Rebels All! A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

5. Trump, *Art of the Deal*, I.

6. Andrew Prokop, "Trump backers hate 'political correctness.' That's why gaffes don't hurt him," *Vox* (February 29, 2016), <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/29/11133796/donald-trump-political-correctness>; Lauren Berlant, "Trump, or Political Emotions," *The New Inquiry* (August 5, 2016), <https://thenewinquiry.com/features/trump-or-political-emotions/>.

7. Fred Barnes, *Rebel in Chief: Inside the Bold and Controversial Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Crown, 2006). About this book, and the general reputation Bush sought to cultivate among his conservative base, historian Kevin Mattson writes, "Barnes does not see Bush as a statesman (or as stately); rather, his idealized president looks like Marlon Brando mounting his motorcycle and raising hell in the iconic 1953 film *The Wild One*. For Barnes, Bush is 'defiant of the press, scornful of the conventional wisdom, and keen to reverse or at least substantially reform long-standing policies.' The president is 'edgy' and 'blunt'; he leads an army of insurgents." Mattson, 2.

8. Trump, *Art of the Deal*, 5.

9. Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1977).

10. Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessman's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: Norton, 2009).

11. David Gordon, *Fat and Mean: The Corporate Squeeze of Working Americans and the Myth of Managerial Downsizing* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

12. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1951), 232.

13. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 143–68, 287–88; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic, 1995), 109–33, 221–42; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 352, 281–83; Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 85, 101–4; Peter Koloz, *Conservatives Against Capitalism: From the Industrial Revolution to Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 167–89.

14. See Jonathan Chait, "What's Less Popular Than Donald Trump? Pretty Much Everything Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell Are Doing," *New York* (May 29, 2017), <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/05/whats-less-popular-than-donald-trump-paul-ryan-and-mitch-mcconnell.html>; Jeff Stein, "Paul Ryan's Agenda has been a much bigger liability for the GOP than Trump's Scandals," *Vox* (May 23, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/5/23/15674450/paul-ryan-special-election>; Eric Levitz, "'Small Government' Conservatism Is Killing Republican Voters," *New York* (March 26, 2017), <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/03/small-government-conservatism-is-killing-republican-voters.html>

15. Donald Trump, *Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again!* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011, 2015), 4.

16. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (London: Macmillan, 1980, 1984), 11; Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1960), 7; Frank Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," in *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996), 15.

17. Trump, *Art of the Deal*, 45–48, 63.

18. Trump, *Time to Get Tough*, 2.

19. Trump, *Time to Get Tough*, 8, 24, 27, 29, 33, 36, 41, 48; David K. Johnson, *The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 70.

20. Trump, *Time to Get Tough*, 26.

21. Trump, *Time to Get Tough*, 2, 45, 48.

22. See Ashley Parker, Phillip Rucker, and Sean Sullivan, "Trump Scrambles to Show Progress as the 100-day Mark Approaches," *Washington Post* (April 25, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-scrambles-to-show-progress-as-the-100-day-mark-approaches/2017/04/25/9fc6803c-29d4-11e7-b605-33413c691853_story.html; David Lewis, "So Far Trump Is Struggling as a Chief Executive," *Washington Post* (April 27, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/27/so-far-trump-gets-a-failing-grade-at-managing-the-executive-branch/>; Billy House, Erik Wasson, and Laura Litvan, "Trump Says He'll Sign Congress Spending Deal That Jettisons His Goals," *Bloomberg Politics* (April 30, 2017), <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-05-01/congress-strikes-tentative-deal-on-1-1-trillion-spending-bill>; Aaron Blake, "President Trump Just Had His Bluff Called—Again," *Washington Post* (April 25, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/04/25/president-trump-just-had-his-bluff-called-again/>; James Hohmann, "Trump Is Caving on Border Wall Funding after Showing His Base that He Tried," *Washington Post* (April 25, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2017/04/25/daily-202-trump-is-caving-on-border-wall-funding-after-showing-his-base-that-he-tried/58fea413e9b69b3a72331ec4/>; Amber Phillips, "Trump Is About to Be 0-4 on His Legislative Promises for His First 100 Days," *Washington Post* (April 27, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/04/27/trump-is-about-to-be-0-4-on-his-legislative-promises-for-his-first-100-days/>; Patrick Jenkins and Barney Jopson, "Wall Street's hopes for deregulation switch from laws to watchdogs," *Financial Times* (May 7, 2017), <https://www.ft.com/content/8d46739c-31ac-11e7-9555-23ef563ecf9a>; Ben White and Annie Karni, "America's CEOs fall out of love with Trump," *Politico* (June 3, 2017), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/03/donald-trump-ceos-corporate-relationship-239080>.

23. Matthew Yglesias, "The 3 different things we talk about when we talk about 'Trump voter,'" *Vox* (December 7, 2016), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/7/13854512/who-are-trump-supporters>; Benjy Sarlin, "United States of Trump," *NBC News* (June 20, 2016), <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/donald-trump-republican-party>; Justin Gest, "The Two Kinds of Trump Voters," *Politico* (February 8, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/trump-voters-white-working-class-214754>; Nate Cohn, "A 2016 Review: Turnout Wasn't the Driver of Clinton's Defeat," *New York Times* (March 28, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/upshot/a-2016-review-turnout-wasnt-the-driver-of-clintons-defeat.html>; Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class," *Washington Post* (June 5, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>.

24. Leighton Akio Woodhouse, "Obama's Deportation Policy Was Even Worse Than We Thought," *The Intercept* (May 15, 2017), <https://theintercept.com/2017/05/15/obamas-deportation-policy-was-even-worse-than-we-thought/>; Aviva Chomsky, "Making Sense of the Deportation Debate," *TomDispatch.com* (April 25, 2017), <http://www.tomdispatch.com>

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25. Robin, "Trump's Inaugural Address versus Reagan's Inaugural Address."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of evidence would support Neustadt's argument about presidential power? For instance, would Donald Trump's behavior and influence be evidence in favor of Neustadt's argument?
2. Describe the steps in veto bargaining. Explain why the actual use of the veto is not evidence that having the veto is influential.
3. According to Canes-Wrone, under what conditions do presidents pander to the public? Under what conditions do presidents try to lead the public or act against the public's wishes?
4. "By moving first," Howell says, presidents can have great influence over policy by issuing executive orders. Why are Congress and the federal courts disadvantaged when presidents act unilaterally?
5. Contrast Donald Trump's version of conservatism with the Republican Party's more mainstream conservatism.
6. Describe some of the real constraints on the president's capacity to act unilaterally. Then describe conditions under which the president can successfully act unilaterally.