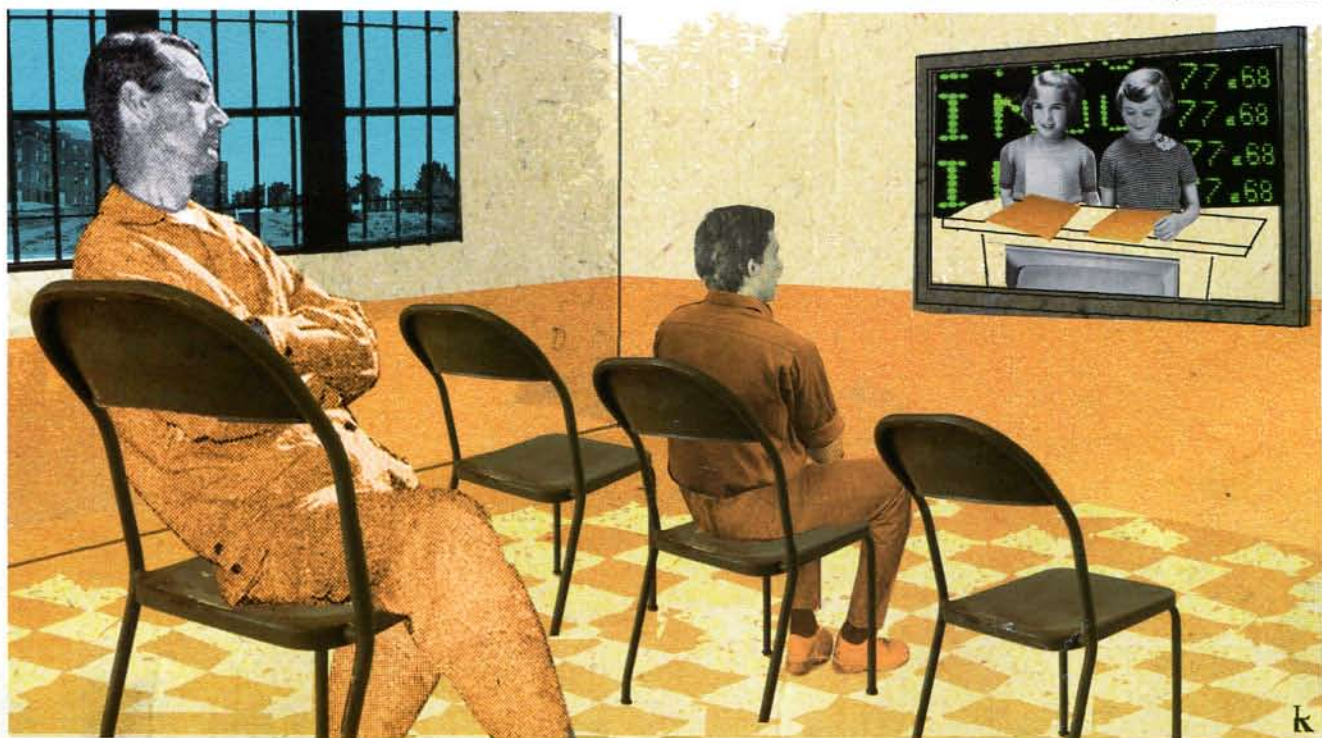


THOMAS FRANK ON JOURNALISM'S CONTENT-MILL

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# 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*.

**E**ver 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 Galebo, from *Maske*, a monograph published in October by Chris Boot. Galebo'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