

The Shipwrecked Mind

BY MARK LILLA

We live in an age when the tragicomic nostalgia of Don Quixote for a lost golden age has been transformed into a potent and sometimes deadly weapon, writes Mark Lilla, one of America's foremost intellectuals, in his new book. The revolutionary spirit that inspired political movements across the world for two centuries may have died out. But the spirit of reaction that rose to meet it has survived and is proving just as formidable a historical force.

Hope, said the philosopher Francis Bacon, is a good breakfast, but an ill supper.¹ Only a quarter century ago, hope was an active force in world politics. The Cold War ended peacefully and despite ethnic war in the Balkans functioning constitutional democracies took root in Eastern Europe. The European Union was formally established and membership was steadily extended eastward. Politicians and commentators spoke confidently of “transitions to democracy” in states around the globe. Economies were deregulated and free trade agreements were approved. China opened up and India became more prosperous. The Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians were signed, and Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa after spending three decades in prison.

Do we even remember what hope looked like? Today politics worldwide is being driven instead by anger, despair, and resentment. And, above all, nostalgia. “Make X Great Again” is the demagogic slogan of our time, and not just in the United States. What is political Islamism but the violent translation of a fantasy of return, in this case to an imagined era of religious purity and military might? Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan succeeds by spreading a Turkish version of it, invoking the grandeur of the Ottomans. Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his career by propagating Hindutva, a fanciful Hindu nationalism that extols Indian civilization before the arrival of Muslims. Far-right parties across Europe traffic in similar imagined pasts. We can measure how far we have come since 1989 by the fact that both Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping now garner support by appealing to symbols of the glorious Communist era.

We live in a reactionary age. Revolutionaries traffic in hope. They believe, and wish others to believe, that a radical break with the past is possible and that it will inaugurate a new era of human experience. Reactionaries believe that such a break has already occurred and has been disastrous. While to the untrained eye the river of time seems to flow as it always has, the reactionary sees the debris of paradise drifting past his eyes. He is time's exile. The revolutionary sees the radiant future and it electrifies him. The reactionary sees the past in all its splendor and he too is electrified. He feels himself in a strong position because he is the guardian of what actually happened, not the prophet of what



Popular Front, Paris 1936

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might be. This explains the strangely exhilarating despair that courses through reactionary literature and political rhetoric, the palpable sense of mission. As the editors of the right-leaning magazine *National Review* put it in its very first issue, the mission is to “stand athwart history, yelling Stop!” Barricades come in many forms.

Reactionaries are not conservatives. This is the first thing to be understood about them. Conservatives have always seen society as a kind

of inheritance we receive and are responsible for. This means, contrary to liberal thinking, that our obligations take priority over our rights. But it also means that we are the medium through which society changes, as it is always doing. The healthiest way to bring about change, the conservative believes, is through consultation and slow transformations in custom and tradition, not by announcing bold reform programs or defending supposedly inalienable individual rights. But the conserva-

tive is also reconciled to the fact that history never stands still and that we are only passing through. Conservatism seeks to instill the humble thought that history moves us forward, not the other way around. And that radical attempts to master it through sheer will bring disaster. That was the French revolutionaries' mistake.

Reactionaries reject this conservative outlook. They are, in their way, just as radical as revolutionaries and just as destructive. Faith in

a new social order inspire the revolutionary. Apocalyptic anger at finding himself disempowered in a new dark age inebriates the reactionary. And both traffic in historical fantasies. Reactionary stories always begin with a happy, well-ordered state where people willingly shared a common destiny. Then alien ideas promoted by intellectuals and outsiders—writers, journalists, professors, foreigners—undermined that harmony. (The betrayal of elites is central to every reactionary myth.) Soon the entire society, even the common people, were taken in. Only those who have preserved memories of the old ways—the reactionaries themselves—see what happened. Whether the society reverses direction or rushes to its ultimate doom depends entirely on their resistance.

Nor are reactionaries to be found only on the right. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and of revolutionary hopes for the post-colonial world, the European left has traded the rhetoric of hope for that of nostalgia. Nostalgia for its own past power. The story the reactionary left tells itself begins with the revolutions of centuries past, the uprisings, the general strikes. And also the literature of revolt, the manifestos, the ten-point programs, and the memoirs of noble defeats, which on the left always count as victories. How did that whole world disappear? Once again, alien ideas are blamed. An international cabal of ‘neoliberal’ economists, we are told, managed to convince governments and formerly working class voters that to get rich is glorious and that everyone would benefit from growth. Racists then convinced them that their enduring problems were not due to the inherent injustices of capitalism, but to immigrants and minorities. The only way out of the contemporary catastrophe is to Make the Left Great Again.

This past summer nostalgia for the old left swept over Paris. It was the 18th anniversary of the Popular Front, the left-wing coalition that led a massive general strike in 1936 that succeeded in gaining workers many new rights, including to paid vacations. It is, with good reason, a milestone in French collective memory. Histories of the movement and novels of the period were on display in bookstores across the city, and the mayor sponsored a series of photo exhibits, conferences, and lectures, as well as a film festival of propaganda films made by important directors sympathetic to the strike. (This being Paris, champagne and canapés

were served in the lobby on opening night.)

Out on the streets that history seemed to be repeating itself, if only as farce. For months the country's more radical unions led marches against very modest changes in France's notoriously baroque labor law, which were proposed by the Socialist government in order to introduce a modicum of flexibility into hiring and work hours. The theatrics of the protests I attended were exactly those of the newsreels I saw from 1936. At the starting point union members and sympathizers were given banners and armbands. Music played and large balloons with slogans denouncing capitalism floated overhead. As the marching started drummers drum and singers sang the *Internationale*, singing at the top of their lungs "C'est la lutte finale!"—it's the final struggle! The crowd included many young students, for whom participating has been a rite of passage for generations. It also included the requisite troublemakers, who at the end of the march fought with police and were dispersed with tear gas and water cannons. In one incident, the hooligans attacked a children's hospital, frightening the young patients inside.

There is a connection between the French strikes, the British vote to leave the EU, and the enthusiasm for Donald Trump in middle America. Economic globalization and the paralysis of democratic institutions has left ordinary people in Western societies feeling disenfranchised. So has the fact that no party or movement across the political spectrum has offered a plausible vision of the future based on present realities, which change with increasing speed. To live a modern life anywhere in the world today, subject to perpetual social and technological transformations, is to experience the psychological equivalent of permanent revolution. Anxiety in the face of this process is now a universal experience, which is why reactionary ideas attract adherents around the world who share little except their sense of historical betrayal. Every major social transformation leaves behind a fresh Eden that can serve as the object of somebody's nostalgia. And the reactionaries of our time have discovered that nostalgia can be a powerful political motivator, perhaps even more powerful than hope. Hope can be disappointed. Nostalgia is irrefutable. <

¹ Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. A. Clark (Oxford 1898), Vol. 1, p. 74.

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I Wanna Hold Your Hand

BY MILOŠ VEC

Controversies over Muslims refusing to shake hands with non-Muslims have recently arisen in a number of European countries. They demonstrate a conflict between social customs, religious practices and legal prescriptions. Multinormativity is both part of the problem and the key to a better understanding and more considered handling of the issue, argues IWM Permanent Fellow Miloš Vec.

The politics of the body carry a high symbolic value and regularly occupy the media. This goes for current conflicts over instances where Muslims have refused to shake hands with non-Muslims, which particularly in 2016 have caused discussions. These controversies have escalated beyond the local context not only because of the behavior of those involved, but also because of the reactions of institutions and civil society. The result is

Muslim footballer Nacer Barazite of the Dutch team FC Utrecht refused to shake hands with the sports reporter Héléne Hendriks on live TV. In April 2016, the Swedish Muslim Green party politician Yasri Khan resigned from his own party following heavy criticism after he refused to shake hands with a female TV journalist. In April 2016, it was reported that two Syrian brothers living in the Swiss town of Therwil had refused to shake hands with their teacher at

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a complex challenge that poses both state and society with an apparently insoluble dilemma: Should the cultural identity of the majority society and its social conventions be actively defended? Or does the western concept of democracy not also include a liberal, constitutionally anchored freedom of religion, which entails tolerance towards deviating customs? The fact that majority society now demands the social and cultural conformity of migrants and refugees makes the issue all the more contentious and theoretically interesting.

Much Ado About Nothing?

Essentially it is about different understandings about what constitutes an "appropriate" greeting between men and women. In an intercultural context, these understandings are apparently irreconcilable. Social conventions, religious precepts and moral scruples are invoked to explain and justify individual behavior, yet ultimately the law is expected to solve the conflict. Multinormative demands in society are the reasons for these disputes; however multinormativity might also be the key to a more considered handling of the differences.

Nevertheless, the question remains to which extent media coverage has contributed to a public over-reaction. As far as is known, it is a matter of a series of isolated instances. In autumn 2015, an Imam working at a refugee home in Rhineland announced that he would not extend his hand in greeting to the CDU politician Julia Klöckner, whereupon Klöckner cancelled the meeting. On 1 November 2015, the

the beginning and end of lessons (a school ritual). They were 14 and 15 years old and their father is an Imam. At the end of June 2016, at a private school in Berlin, a Shiite Imam from Turkey refused to shake hands with his son's headmistress. In July 2016, a Muslim pupil in Hamburg refused to shake hands with his teacher, who wanted to congratulate him on passing his final exams. In a much older case in Carinthia in Austria, an Islamic religious teacher and Sudanese citizen refused to greet women by shaking hands.

Despite the different local contexts, in all these cases the individual refusal to shake hands led to far-reaching social discussions about cultural and religious identities. The many press reports, glosses and commentaries published on the issue now created and defined an entire canon of cases, which exerts a major influence on current opinion: positions are aired and strong opinions often formulated. To the extent that online comments are permitted after articles on the topic, they show that the controversies are instrumentalized by political and religious extremists on both sides against a pluralist and tolerant concept of society.

Right Hand Symbolism

Although the real figures are probably much higher, as far as is known it is a case of isolated incidents in schools, with public authorities and in the public sphere, and by no means—as is sometimes suggested—a mass social phenomenon. Moreover, media reportage primarily concentrates on debates in German speaking countries. Experiences from other European coun-



tries, not to mention other continents, very rarely make it into the headlines, if at all. There is no mention of the widespread convention among Muslims and Orthodox Jews throughout the Middle East not to shake a woman's hand out of politeness. In view of the many violent conflicts worldwide, some external observers find these debates strangely trifling. Even people who were refused a handshake deliberately and demonstratively have so far not claimed to be injured in a legal sense (e.g. as a violation of criminal law). The lack of respect they experienced thus counts as no more than a breach of good manners. It is primarily a question of disregard for social protocol, a classic case of impoliteness, and not a breach of a legal norm.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that refusing to shake hands can cause irritation or insult to other people. The handshake as a ritual of greeting is symbolically loaded, particularly in connection with the right hand. It expresses friend-

liness, commitment, physical proximity, and the consensual nature of the social contact. At the same time, unlike the hug, it signals a formalization, in which polite distance is involved. For many, the handshake embodies the self-conception of civil society, in which reciprocal social relations are not to be mistaken for friendship. The right hand is also highly symbolic in cultural-historical terms. One raises it not only when greeting, whether close by or from a distance, but also to swear an oath, in other words a metaphysically founded, conditional self-damnation. Contracts can be demonstratively concluded with a handshake, as can words of honor and promises. An indication of the cultural significance of the hand is provided by Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Wander in his five-volume, nineteenth-century lexicon of German proverbs, which lists 924 proverbs and sayings associating "hand". Additionally, there are also numerous composite nouns equivalent to "handshake", including, literally, "hand press", "hand smack"