A Reactionary Recalls the Fifties

by Samuel Hux (May 2022)



Dining Room on the Garden, Pierre Bonnard, 1934-35

What's the difference between *conservative* and *reactionary*? Online we're told the latter means opposing liberalism and all reform as well. But that's unrealistic: reform will occur in the nature of things whether intended or not; and reform is

not necessarily to the Left. Most will think a reactionary is simply an extreme and unyielding conservative; the liberal will think calling someone a reactionary is more dismissive and insulting. The more precise dictionary definition will, instead of implying anti-reform, instruct the reader that the reactionary, rather than holding the conservative line, wishes to return to the past that preceded what's being conserved. But that's tricky. It really depends on when you're counting.

A reactionary in the 1930s or '40s could wish to return to the years before Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal (although he might call himself merely a conservative); a conservative in the 1940s might agree to conserve the New Deal, wishing it to go no further. A conservative in 1965 could accept the Civil Rights legislation as due after all; a reactionary in that period might wish that legislation overturned. Considering these examples, the reactionary sounds like a sorehead who rejects Edmund Burke's teaching that society will inevitably change and that necessary reforms are those that respectfully conserve what is best that survives the past, preserving society as a conversation between those who are dead, those who are living, and those who are yet to be.

But hold on a moment. I habitually call myself a traditionalist conservative, Burkean. Occasionally, however, I will call myself a Neo-Con, since I am an ex-socialist who approves of a tough foreign policy and an internationalist role for the U.S. And, admiring Disraeli and Churchill as much as I do, I am not beyond identifying as a misplaced Tory. Yet I am beginning to wonder if I should not confess to being a Reactionary (with caps), for often, more than sometimes, I sorely wish (although no sorehead) that the reforms and new standards of the past few years could be erased or tossed into the dustbins of history.

I preferred the days of racial integration made into law, not the in-effect re-segregation preferred by Black intellectuals. Color-blind laws and institutions, not Affirmative Action

(Negative action in effect). Traditional marriage between wife and husband. Two legal sexes, law following nature. Individuals pursuing careers where they prefer, with no 'ideal' of racial and gender "distribution." The Left acting seriously in pursuit of socialist or quasi-socialist agendas instead of imitating prissy social do-gooders. Your favorite waitress called "Sweetheart" as in the old days, recognized as appreciation not condescension. I could go on.

All these "improvements" and more make the liberal "community" feel proud of itself, feel so virtuous. They should feel corrupt.

I have an image of William Buckley standing in the path of history commanding "*Stop!*" The reactionary follows "Stop" with "Now, *Reverse*!" But the reactionary does not have to be unrealistic, fanatical. He knows that things cannot help but change bit by bit: he knows that some change is to the good, and he prefers that such change be the casually apparently inevitable, codified by custom and then by law—instead of invented and forced upon all by radical or revolutionary activists. That's not only a generalization; it's a confession.

In other words, I am happy that integration displaced segregation and then was codified legally—and yes it was happening before law said it must be. I am glad that my mother was my father's equal legally and socially, generated by love, before it was announced as necessary by feminist doctrine. Speaking more pragmatically, it's good that medical science, driven by curiosity as well as professional responsibility, in persons like Jonas Salk and his professional descendants, secured for me and mine a degree of safety in a pandemic. Although in this case it would be better if law could mandate safety. No reactionary who is not an idiot wants science not to advance and law not keep up with it. I could go on with changes no reactionary can morally wish never to have happened.

Nonetheless and nevertheless, the reactionary can judge that—if changes like those in the paragraph above had been characteristic of "back then"—life was better *back then.* Of course when you say *back then*, you have to specify when. Since I am the boss here, I'll be the judge of *when*. And since I came of intellectual age, roughly speaking, in the 1950s, when things were certainly not perfect, I will wish (or pretend to) that it is back then again, but with this standard proviso: that I knew then what I know now.

The United States and allies had less than a decade before won the greatest war in history. We (the U.S. and Great Britain, at least) were the moral champions of the world. No complexity or ambiguity about that. It would be years before the Left told us we were imperialistic sons of bitches, that we should not attempt to halt the advance of communism in parts of the world where it was not our business, should not try to counter the legitimate aims of "freedom fighters."

The U.S.—more than Britain (a complex issue)—stood firmly and proudly behind the new state of Israel, for moral reasons not necessarily in our best interests (after all, think of Arab oil). No reasonable person could have conceived that eventually Israel's defense against highly-populated Arab or Muslim nations, so successfully, would lead to Israelis becoming the "new Nazis," unpopular even with Europe which had witnessed the Holocaust, and anathema to most of the American Left, to say nothing of an American president, Barack Obama, and an anti-Semitic cadre (call a spade a spade, or as Harry Truman said, call it a goddamned shovel) within the "Progressive" wing of the Democratic Party.

"We" as the 1950s began were still or yet again at war, the Korean "police action." Yet it was not exactly, not by far, like the real war years half a decade, and more, earlier, when civilization had been exactly on line. Having won that war so decidedly, we were confident that if we had to, we could pull the trick again. Whether Truman or Eisenhower led the country,

Americans were not only confident, but patriotic in a non-superficial way. We “knew” that we were as a nation the best thing that had ever happened to the world. And we were. And the strongest nation that had ever been. And we were. The future was ours.

And now? With a military like none seen in world history—and with political leaderships with no bloody idea what to do with it beyond tout it—we have reached a point, or have descended to a point, where we are in more danger than any time in our history. Normally in a war it’s a nation (or nations) against a nation (or nations) as in the two World Wars. But now we are not at war with a nation or nations but with a murderous ideology spanning great areas of the world. You can’t drop a bomb: there is no “Hiroshima” or “Nagasaki,” and although the murderous ideology is fermented and/or approved by millions of Muslims (yes, yes, not all Muslims, only millions) we can’t go to war with Islam itself. Imagine what it would have been like roughly 80 years ago if we had announced that since not every single German was a committed Hitlerite we were not at war with Germans, and hence not at war with Germany, but only with Hitler and National Socialism. Incoherent! That’s what we have now, incoherence. And all the more so because it has become standard “proper” thought in the States that any suspicion or fear of Muslims is “just as bad as” anti-Black and anti-Jewish bias, the illogical “logic” of which has to imply incoherently and insanely that millions of Blacks and millions of Jews foment and/or approve terrorism. Incoherence multiplied. We’re in a hell of a mess. I don’t have the confidence that people in the 1950s could enjoy.

Furthermore, when it was necessary—as in the Korean war—we were willing to exercise our considerable military might, taking on the North Korean communists, and the Chinese. But now (it is April 2022 as I write) while World War III has already begun, I mean of course the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States leads NATO in refusing to allow

Ukraine into NATO—thus encouraging the Russian invasion—and refuses to put "Boots on the Ground" or to impose a no-fly zone—evidently fearful of a Russian military which has shown itself to be bumbling and incompetent and capable primarily of bombarding cities and terrorizing civilians. An American disgrace of the mis- and non-use of the profession of arms. While World War III has already begun we act as if we must not do anything to bring about World War III.

Whether one was a Democrat or a Republican back then depended to large degree upon casual tradition, family influence, and region, as much as or more than political beliefs and preferences. Nobody knew whether Dwight Eisenhower was a Democrat or a Republican—maybe not even Ike himself—until he accepted the Republican nomination. When he did, Adlai Stevenson didn't have a chance, as Democrats deserted the party in droves, saying "I like Ike." Republicans remained loyal to Ike even though he had a reputation that would today gain him the appellation meant to be insulting, *Rino*, "Republican in name only." If you were a liberal New Yorker, lower or middle class, the chances were certain you'd be a Democrat, but if upper class liberal a Republican. Conservatives in North Carolina were almost all Democrats, who dismissed Republicans as liberals. Later Ronald Reagan could never have won without "Reagan Democrats," many from the labor unions. All this while the Dems were known to be the liberal party and the Reps the conservative. The merely loosely ideological nature of party politics drove professors crazy. But there was something human about it … unlike the *inhumane* civil war that has become American politics the last few years.

That Harry Truman had been an artillery officer in World War I probably was not dispositive in his election, but it certainly did not hurt. Eisenhower was General Ike, leader of the victory in Europe, and that more than "did not hurt." In recent decades military service has neither hurt nor helped

candidates for highest office, heroes rejected but “4Fs” and draft dodgers rewarded. We’re told often enough that the most respected institution in the United States is the military, whether Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Air Force, or Marine Corps. But *institution* is one thing and an individual soldier, sailor, airman, or “jarhead” is another thing. Especially in this age of terrorism there have been several generals and admirals of presidential stature, but only Colin Powell would have had a chance, for an obvious reason having nothing to do with military service. Others, more impressive as military leaders, would have no chance to be either the Democratic or Republican nominee. No such name has even come up for even journalistic speculation. Respect for the profession of arms has no political weight in these perilous times. I find I certainly have less confidence in the American leadership lottery than I did when a young man.

When I returned to college after a stint as soldier, formative experience for which I am grateful, higher education was just that: *higher*. There were practical undergraduate degrees to be earned, such as Business Administration. But the vastly vast number of students shunned them as too limited (some knowing that if inclined to Pop’s firm or some such, Economics was deeper). To be a real college or university student one majored and/or minored in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, or if at “State Tech” in Engineering. The largest departments because of student demand—at least where I went—were History and English by far, and Political Science just edging out Sociology and Economics. There was even a sizeable Philosophy faculty. And this was the result not only of student demand, but of faculty responsibility: no one is properly educated without general-education requirements in the Liberal Arts and Sciences. My undergrad years were a feast. I recall so well the excitement of each semester going to the bookstore pouring over new titles (of *books*, not textbooks). Religion (not sermons) this semester, Botany (my god, I should have chosen Physics). Art History (an adventure

in beauty, and such a pleasure listening to Professor Sommer rasping with technological aid through vocal chords damaged by Nazi "experiments" in a *Konzentrationslager*). Yes, some profs were my heroes. Professor Holman strolling-lecturing on American novels without notes: man in thought; Professor Natanson with his enormous pipe and encyclopedic knowledge of continental metaphysics. I could go one. I need another paragraph.

Now: the arts and sciences are in retreat, except at special places which hold the line such as St. John's College in Annapolis. Practical education (better called *training*) proliferates, and "serves" most students, while Humanities students would have a difficult time finding a quorum. Famously, a student at Harvard wonders who Malcom the Tenth—that is, Malcolm X—was. While arts and sciences retreat they do not of course totally disappear; otherwise unemployment would be disastrous for faculty types. But students must be protected from the dangers of free intellectual pursuits; classrooms must be safe zones. Imagine the danger to a lit student in reading, for instance, Joseph Conrad's The *Heart of Darkness.* Or a film history student viewing *Gone with the Wind* without a liberal preface setting a context of disapproval. Or judge how a history student exploring the nature of National Socialism could be damaged for life by reading selections from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: goodness gracious sakes alive! The evidence, especially at political rallies, of rampant stupidity is already astounding. It cannot help that higher education now, compared to back then, is an embarrassment.

Sports, like other entertainments, are important, leisure being as good for the soul as honest labor, physical or mental, is. I know only a little bit about athletics in Great Britain. But when the 1950s began, there'd been an American revolution led by Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby in baseball. The greatest batter was Ted Williams, but the greatest all-

around player was Joe DiMaggio—both earning $100,000 per season: not poor by any means, but not pampered millionaires like professional athletes today, who switch teams almost at leisure, going where the money is. DiMaggio was a New York Yankees his entire career, Williams with the Boston Red Sox, and Robinson a Brooklyn Dodger, who retired to avoid a trade to the rival New York Giants. Doby was with the Cleveland Indians for near a decade before being traded to Chicago's White Sox. Loyalty was considered a virtue, often to a player's financial disadvantage. Fans expected it. DiMaggio was once asked why he played full-steam even when victory was out of reach for the opponent. I owe it to the fans, not all of whom have seen me before, he answered. Not all players were major-leaguers, but there were minor leagues from AAA down to D, with loyal fans rewarded with truly professional play (or *work* one might call it). I was as loyal to the Class D Greenville Greenies as to my favorite big league teams the Yankees and Red Sox, not knowing that loyalty to both such rivals was a metaphysical impossibility. Nowadays one had best be loyal to a single player rather than team because he may well be gone elsewhere next year with swollen pockets. And forget about the minor leagues if you live in the outlands, because they are no longer "in the same league" so to speak, being locations for "temps" in training or for injured players working themselves back to health, and the special guy you feel attached to may be gone to replace someone at the big team before the season is over. There is only one improvement that could have been made to organized baseball in those glory days. "Relegation," as in European soccer, when the few teams at the bottom of the Premier league at season's end (*few* different in number from country to country) are dropped to the league just below it, and the few at the top of the minor league move up to the Premier. Had organized baseball adopted this policy some excellent AAA teams would have found themselves where they really belonged. But that said, I don't think I would love baseball as much as I do (which is less than I did) had I not been brought up in an earlier time.

Between 1946, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and 1956, *The Searchers*, was the golden decade of American film. By the 1960s and beyond, anybody who knew anything knew that the great movies were made in France, Italy, Sweden, and Great Britain. And maybe they were. But so were they in the U.S. in the '50s. *The Country Girl. A Streetcar Named Desire.* I could go on. In the novel Saul Bellow was breaking into his speed: *The Adventures of Augie March, Seize the Day, Henderson the Rain King.* As was William Styron: *Lie Down in Darkness, The long March.* I have more or less ceased reading American fiction. In drama: Tennessee Williams was already there, before the stage descended into Neil Simon. Poetry: masters like Robert Frost, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and Robert Penn Warren were still writing, to say nothing of Englishman W.H. Auden, U.S. resident, and Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht were coming on the scene. Name me a widely published poet writing now in that league. Only Dana Gioia comes to mind.

People had better manners in the 1950s; Americans I mean. And for a considerable time after. I'm about to say something which may mark me as guilty of an "ism." Manners, which I think of as "small morals," but large in consequence, were in line with what Russell Kirk called "America's British Culture." We Americans were more "British" in those days. I am not complimenting my ethnicity: Scots-Irish coupled with German (North Carolina Germans had been fully "anglicized" for more than 200 years). My two best friends are of Italian and Ashkenazi Jewish descent, but both are as fully "British" as I am. For two centuries non-Brit immigrants from Europe adopted American British Culture as insistently as did English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and Cornish. My thoroughly Jewish Yiddish speaking spouse is as ABC as I am. You had no manners if you did not address your elders as Mister or Missus, Yes Sir or Yes Ma'am. No gentleman let a lady open a door if it was within his reach, and no lady would fail to thank him. Your professor was "Professor," not Jack or Daisy. If you were

a church or synagogue attendant you wore your Sabbath best, not tee-shirt or dungarees or shorts. No way your behavior could offend George VI or young Elizabeth II. No gent would sit in the subway leaving a female on her feet. None of this means you—he or she—was a pompous ass: you had a sense of humor about the whole thing. There's a mythical fiction about Shelley and Keats: both are in line waiting to sign an entrance book to enjoy some exhibit when Shelley accidently steps in front of a nun. Keats pats him on the shoulder—I hope the reader remembers the tune—and says "Wait 'til the nun signs, Shelley." Nowadays I see the following at least once a week (a slight exaggeration at most): (1) man drives up in nice car, exits without opening the woman's door, or (2) man walks *in front* of his wife or date, with no attentiveness. If I tried that on my wife, she'd remain unmoving 'til the cows came home.

A reader could misunderstand me—since I've left myself open—and assume I am blaming the current failure of manners on immigrants unlike my late father-in-law or native-born chaps like my parents, sister, and me. There are no more courteous people in the world than Black church ladies—although Black youngsters can be as discourteous as paler teens. Perhaps there are areas of the globe from which people come who are resistant to being "Britishified." But I don't know. My impression, for what it's worth, is that Asians by and large are already Ladies and Gentlemen when they arrive and don't have to undergo gentrification (like Japanese so excellent at Western music) or are eager to get gentrified if arriving with rough edges. In any case, the reader will have noticed surely that the discourteous man in his auto and/or leaving the female to shuffle behind him is intended by me to have had a proper education or similar upbringing—otherwise he would not shock me as he does. No, I don't think the problem is a matter of new immigration. Something has happened since back then in the '50s, and I do not know why or exactly how—unless crassness is an offshoot of material progress (?). But I do

know why I began to notice before I began to generalize.

For the very longest time *publishing* was considered a gentleman's (and lady's) profession. Was. No longer is. Let me get the easy stuff out of the way first. Publishing houses used to be independent and relatively small endeavors. The familiar names one might know are now in most cases mere imprints within vast conglomerates with names one's never heard of. The literary gent who ran the old house does not run the new conglomerate; econometricians do that. With enormous consequences. Academic presses are generally free of this phenomenon; but who knows what the future holds? Most of the futures I foresee are not comforting. The conglomerates and the imprints reject submissions directly from authors and rely on agents (who still call themselves *literary* agents, although one wonders if they read well). A publishing house relying on agents is like a hospital relying on insurance companies to judge who should get medical services. But most of the time it doesn't matter anyway, for to get an agent you generally have to have published a book by a publishing house which requires a submission from an agent you can't get without already having published a book. So if you need therefore an agent, go ahead and try. If you get an answer you can count yourself the subject of a miracle. Of course I exaggerate somewhat, but not much. O.K. . . so forget about an agent and, since you're not submitting a manuscript, politely query the publishers and wait for the reply you are not going to get. If the reader is an author to whom none of this is relevant to his or her experience, then let the reader not feel rewarded for quality work, but feel instead fantastically lucky. Thank the fates for blessings rained upon you.

Does this sound like a *personal* complaint? Well, of course in part it is. I started publishing heavily half a century ago—essays in cultural reviews and journals of opinion—before going almost silent for almost two decades (for good but painful reasons which are nun-a-ya-bizness) before returning

to the keyboard. By now I've placed near 150 pieces in distinguished journals, and given the rate at which I work it would be maybe 300 had I not retreated for those lost years. In the earlier period I would occasionally hear from someone asking what was on my mind, writer-wise. I recall an editor from Atlantic Monthly Press, the late Esther Yntema, asking if I had a book in mind. I thanked her, we had a brief correspondence about my confession that I had a 5000-word mind, but if something book-ish turned up. . . . In this later period I occasionally write to periodical editors where I had published earlier, and I am shocked at how often I hear not a word. It is elementary manners that when someone says Hello to you that you return the greeting; it is elementary courtesy that if you write a letter the receiver sends a note at least. That's not a hell of a lot to ask. If you could ask it casual person to casual person, it should not be too much professional to professional. It is shocking to me how good manners have declined-to-disappeared in the literary-intellectual world. What the hell has happened? A minor incident, perhaps: A friend attended a poetry reading by a poet I will call Mary Jo McBitch. My friend accidentally met her just after the reading and told her how much she'd always liked her poems. McBitch asked my friend's name and, not recognizing it, turned and walked away. Minor, maybe, but major.

Not recently, but within memory, I have stumbled upon Harold Pinter and the actors Patrick Magee and diminutive Linda Hunt (at separate times). I greeted each with expressions of pleasure, and was rewarded with expressions of appreciation. But they were all British, weren't they? I do this sort of thing often, habitually, or used to. Meeting Sam Waterston in a diner I told him how much I appreciate his movie roles, but thought the most memorable thing he did was *Much Ado about Nothing* on Broadway years ago: he almost gushed with pleasure that I remembered. Meeting Mia Farrow in a coffee shop I recalled seeing her with Richard Attenborough in Africa: she

beamed with delight, “You remember my first film!” In the same coffee shop a year or so later I said to a beautiful woman, “You’re either Jamie Lee Curtis or one hell of a likeness!” She responded by playing verbal games with me, to my great delight. But I hesitate to do “this sort of thing” now, years later. A couple of years ago I stood in a grocery line behind my favorite actress Meryl Streep. I wanted to say in a Danish accent, “I had a farm in Africa,” but I was afraid, and curse myself still. It would have made my day.

The reader may have noticed—perhaps—that I publish essays regularly in *New English Review*, not, I confide, because I have no other options. I do so because of the pleasure I take in the old-fashioned manners of the publisher of *New English Review Press,* Rebecca Bynum, and the Managing Editor of *NER,* Kendra Mallock, both of whom “answer their mail,” both gracious Ladies who would not object to being called such. And I enjoy our correspondence, even when occasionally at odds.

There were things wrong with the 1950s. In spite of slow reform before, yet because of it, the civil-rights revolution was only in its infancy; but if one did not see that racial segregation was soon to be legally doomed one was not paying much attention. Full resistance to recognition of the obvious fact of female equality with men, and sometimes more (“Anything you can do, I can do better”), had not died out, although about to expire. The world peace that victory in World War II had promised had not yet, yet, yet arrived … (Notice the absence there of a definitive punctuation.) Although we in the States were learning that communism was, in spite of WW II necessities, little or no better than fascism ultimately, there was a semi-fascistic vulgarity in D.C. which definitively expired only with the enforced expiration of McCarthyism itself (and himself).

Decades have reputations. The Roaring Twenties. The Radical Thirties. The Forties were simply The War Years. And the Fifties were The Age of Conformity, certainly not meant to be

a compliment. But I find a great deal to compliment there-then. Of course I don't seriously wish I were living in the '50s again via some time-traveling machine, even "knowing what I know now." I hate to think of never having met those I have known, loved, and sired, experiences I have had, even instructive bad ones. God forbid. Nevertheless and nonetheless and every positive –theless, the 1950s were a better time, all things considered. *Conformity* is not a bad thing: it depends entirely on what you're conforming to.

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