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— John Medearis, University of California, Riverside

It has long seemed evident to many scholars and critics that conservative thought should be divided into two parts. The first would be its stable core of ideas—including, perhaps, a skeptical attitude toward reason, or a politics of prudence, or a sober view of human nature. Then there would be its multitudinous array of contingent, sometimes eccentric, and occasionally even regrettable expressions. Such an approach provides a convenient way of explaining any illiberal, authoritarian, or atavistic arguments by conservatives. According to this approach, these types of arguments can be assigned to the broad category of the accidental and ephemeral.

This particular kind of taxonomy would seem to be doing rather strenuous explanatory work at this moment, in which the memory is still fresh of the functional leader of the conservative movement in America praising the “very fine people” among a march of white supremacists and neo-Nazis, some of whom had been chanting anti-Semitic slogans and one of whom had murdered a counter-demonstrator.

It is the signal contribution of the original edition of Corey Robin’s The Reactionary Mind (2011) that it offered a compelling alternative to the standard classificatory approach: a new vision that was at once striking and (for many) provoking but also consistent with what many conservatives have always said about themselves. And it provided this alternative, one that could account for Donald Trump, well before anyone took him seriously.

Robin’s argument is that it is not primarily any core of ideas that explains conservatism but instead a continually renewed, yet protean purpose. Since the eighteenth century, he observes—in both the 2011 edition and the thoroughly revised 2018 version—a great many movements have attempted to make good on the modern promises of freedom and equality, extending those ideals to those who have been previously denied them. Conservatism, Robin contends, is best thought of as all the varied responses to these varied movements. It is “the theoretical voice,” he writes, of “animus” against them (p. 7). And so “all conservatives,” Robin argues “are, in one way or another, counterrevolutionary” or reactionary (p. 29).

This orientation toward meeting democratic challenges, according to Robin, predisposes conservatives toward arguments and affinities that seem surprising from the perspective of the standard ideal-typical depiction of the ideology. It inclines them to be activist rather than prudent, to admire the rhetoric and dynamism of revolutionaries (pp. 45–50), and, by contrast, to be impatient with old regimes and their inability to mount effective self-defenses against democratizing movements (pp. 41–45). It predisposes them to try to reach far beyond the ranks of traditional elites to recruit supporters—and so to create new coalitions and structures of inequality (pp. 50–54). And this, in turn, makes conservatism attractive to at least some self-defined outsiders and inclines it to portray itself as an outsider’s voice of dispossession.

Robin’s identification of the continual reactionary impulse and these related tendencies does not mean that he discerns no variety in conservatism, as a number of his critics claimed seven or eight years ago. In fact, he portrays conservatism as diverse and, by need, perennially innovative. This portrayal is perhaps even clearer in the new edition of the book. Robin has revised extensively, omitted several chapters, and added a few others— including one on Trump—and reorganized the whole into one part introducing the main arguments and two more parts with essays on various conservative thinkers. Robin describes the book as consisting of themes and variations, and the variations include interpretive essays that are often, by turns, elegant and surprising. There is a compact essay on Thomas Hobbes, showing how he responded to the challenges of “democraticals” by innovations that traditional monarchists found frightening (pp. 91–103). Another chapter explores the surprising affinity between Nietzsche and neoliberal economists and their ancestors, from Stanley Jevons to Friedrich Hayek (pp. 133–64). Hayek and others, Robin argues in this essay, valorize “a conception of political life as the embodiment of ancient ideals of aristocratic action, aesthetic notions of artistic creation, and a rarefied vision of the warrior,” but they locate that vision “not in high affairs of state but in the operations and personnel of a capitalist economy” (p. 133). He argues in another essay (pp. 201–20) that late-twentieth-century neoconservatives like Irving Kristol, by contrast with Hayek, found themselves dismayed by the ascendancy of market values in late-twentieth-century America, and longed for the return of a nation that would claim an “imperial role” (p. 202).

Robin’s capstone essay on Trump (pp. 239–72) depicts him as illustrating many of the themes developed in the rest of the book, such as recurrent conservative efforts to create “a new-old regime that, in one way or another, makes privilege popular” (p. 243). In Trump’s obsession with besting others in combat, similarly, Robin finds the resurfacing of an atavistic, agonistic vein of conservatism.

Readers may be surprised that Robin argues that Trump has accomplished little and that the increasingly weak national electoral performances of Republicans show that their “fusion of elitism and populism has grown brittle” (p. 268). He casts Trump’s most incendiary bigotry and antidemocratic acts as signs of conservative
desperation. But the book's endnotes show that Robin completed revisions to *The Reactionary Mind* in the middle of 2017—around the time that Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change, but before he signed huge tax cuts into law, appointed a second Supreme Court justice, withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, saw a version of his ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries upheld by the Supreme Court, recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and separated thousands of migrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. Robin may well be correct that Trump is a culminating expression, rather than a dramatic shift in direction, for American conservatism. But it is not yet clear that this continuity with conservatism means Trump's own detronative acts will have few long-lasting effects.

The diversity of Robin's interventions should, in one sense, suffice to counter the criticism that he fails to see variety among conservatives. But those critiques missed their mark for a deeper reason. Mark Lilla's charge that Robin was an "über-lumper" was based on the assumption that explaining conservatism was necessarily a taxonomic endeavor ("Republicans for Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2012). Because Robin posited a common impulse behind all conservatism, Lilla seems to have assumed that Robin was substituting a taxonomy with just one category for a taxonomy with many.

But I do not think Robin's main thesis is taxonomic at all: he owes far more to Karl Mannheim than to Carl Linnaeus. Robin, admittedly, only mentions Mannheim a few times in his book, yet Mannheim's approach to the "sociology of knowledge" perfectly captures what Robin is up to in *The Reactionary Mind*. Mannheim writes in *Ideology and Utopia* (1985) that "there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured" (p. 2). This, he claims, is because people "act with and against one another in diversely organized groups, and while doing so they think with and against one another...Bound together in groups, [they] strive in accordance with the character and position of the groups to which they belong to change the surrounding world of nature and society or attempt to maintain it in a given condition" (p. 4). And so, Mannheim concludes, "It is the direction of this will to change or to maintain...which produces the guiding thread for the emergence of their problems, their concepts, and their forms of thought" (p. 4).

The "über-lumper" charge, then, fundamentally misunderstands where productive critique of work like Robin's is properly directed. Many of the interesting questions about *The Reactionary Mind* have to do with the properly sociological part of his sociology of knowledge. That is, they have to do with the claims Robin relies on about what Mannheim calls the "character and position of the groups" to which thinkers and actors belong—and to his understanding of "the surrounding world of nature and society" (p. 4).

There is space for only two brief examples. Consistent with his view that contemporary relations of power still retain certain early modern and even premodern characteristics, Robin frequently uses terminology to describe potential challengers that has a decidedly eighteenth-century ring. The most striking example is his use of the term "lower orders." Two aspects of Robin's work demonstrate that he does not hold a homogenizing or static view of the people, groups, and movements in question. First is his explicit acknowledgment that such groups are characterized by "very real differences" (p. 4). And second is his recurrent exploration of the claim that conservative movements tend to consist of quite varied coalitions of elites and non-elites, which is Robin's way of recognizing intersectionality. But the generic terminology itself—used instead of more specific terms for particular movements and groups—may make Robin's approach susceptible to misunderstanding.

A more significant example is Robin's argument that the intimate, private aspect of unequal relations of power is generally the most important. This is true, he says, from the standpoint of those subordinates who wish to challenge those relations democratically. Likewise, he claims, "When the conservative looks upon a democratic movement," what he sees is "a terrible disturbance in the private life of power" (p. 13). Robin cites Edmund Burke's fears about challenges to the "chain of subordination" intimately linking "servants" and "masters," "children" and "parents" (p. 13). This insistence on the intimacy of power is crucial to how Robin links contemporary reaction to its eighteenth-century forerunners. It is also essential to how he understands the ability of conservatives to attract non-elite adherents: by encouraging them to feel that they have a stake in defending their own intimate forms of domination. But at least since the rise of both the modern state and of capitalism, it would seem that many forms of domination have been linked to structures and forces that are actually quite vast and impersonal. In these instances, even personal experiences of oppression are referable in part to large-scale, remote, sometimes alien powers. Gig economy workers for whom the "boss" is not a hated person but a relentless algorithm, maintained and updated at the distant headquarters of a technology company, represent only a new extension of this tendency. Democratizing movements are already considering how to calibrate their challenges to such impersonal structures and relations of power. Innovating conservatives will likely need to devise arguments and rhetorical strategies with the same tendencies in mind. And so their interpreters and critics may, in turn, also need a vision less tied to the idea of private and intimate domination. But although I am not convinced that the propinquity of unequal power relations is as crucial as Robin thinks to challengers and defenders alike,
that does not detract from the accomplishment of his powerful reframing of conservatism’s life.

_A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass_. Edited by Neil Roberts. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018. 490p. $80.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/S1537592719002536

— Juliet Hooker, Brown University

_A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass_, edited by Neil Roberts, is an important achievement that will no doubt become an indispensable resource for scholars of Douglass and those interested in African American political thought more generally. It brings together previously published essays and newly formulated chapters that together cover a diverse array of themes central to Douglass’s political thought: his philosophy of liberation, his conception of black leadership and politics, his views on the law, his conception of the United States’ founding, his approach to democratic citizenship, and the gender norms that inform his political ideas.

One of the strengths of Roberts’s editorial work in this volume is the skillful blending of existing and new essays, which together produce multiple and diverse readings of Douglass on similar topics. The first section, for instance, consists primarily of previously published texts that consider how Douglass envisioned freedom and the process by which one becomes free. They include classic texts such as Bernard Boxill’s essay on Douglass’s fight with his overseer Covey and Angela Davis’s lecture on liberation, alongside Paul Gilroy’s and Margaret Kohn’s readings of Douglass in relation to Hegel’s master–slave dialectic and Robert Gooding-Williams’s analysis of Douglass’s democratic approach to black leadership and adherence to different forms of black politics informed by prior declarations of freedom. Read alongside each other—juxtaposed if you will—theses essays present the reader with a much more complex depiction of Douglass’s political thought on freedom than would have been possible by reading each on its own. When read together, the various essays that consider Douglass’s approach to the law—from Peter Myer’s claim that Douglass echoed (with certain modifications) the discourse of natural law in Western political thought, to Vincent Lloyd’s argument that in fact Douglass’s invocation of God’s law represents a distinctively African American intervention that makes affect central to mobilizations in favor of social justice, to Anne Norton’s brilliant reading of lawbreaking as central to Douglass’s vision of democratic citizenship and praxis of politics as a fugitive and rebellious slave—have the similarly felicitous effect of destabilizing any claim that Douglass had a singular view of or approach to the law. A similar productive juxtaposition is achieved in the section on democracy and citizenship by pairing Herbert Storing’s view of Douglass as a preeminent exponent of conventional understandings of the virtues of American political thought with Jason Frank’s reading of Douglass as exemplary of a more complex understanding of the people as the simultaneous invocation of a unified political subject and of those excluded from politics, what he calls the staging of a “dissensus.”

Although all the essays speak to the continued relevance of Douglass’s political thought, two essays in particular (both new contributions) illuminate why he remains a crucial reference point for contemporary philosophical and policy debates. Jack Turner’s essay draws on the speeches Douglass delivered after the end of Reconstruction to sketch a model “anti-racist form of political judgment” that could serve as an important resource in an era when claims of reverse racism abound and when previously enacted measures to dismantle racial hierarchy are themselves being dismantled, from affirmative action to voting rights protections. Similarly, Ange-Marie Hancock Alfaro’s innovative essay tracing the development of a “black male ethic of care” in Douglass’s autobiographical writings demonstrates that, contrary to those who argue that black feminism displaces concern for black men with a singular focus on black women, it is intersectional black feminist analysis that demonstrates that one can center gender in black political thought without reifying traditional patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchies. Hancock Alfaro argues that Douglass forged restorative relationships with other black men that allow us to reconceive “black masculinity as a rich resource for civic friendship” (p. 248).

Indeed, one of the achievements of the volume is its inclusion of female readers of Douglass, in contrast to another recent companion volume on Du Bois in the same series that includes no female authors. Nevertheless, only 2 of the 14 essays deal centrally with gender (the chapters by Hancock Alfaro and Paul Gilroy), and none focus on sexuality. This echoes a pattern common to the field of political theory as a whole whereby concern with gender and sexuality continues to be seen as the purview of feminist theory, queer theory, and so on, and those writing about other aspects of Douglass or any other figure’s political thought continue to be exempt from considering how gender and sexuality shaped his or her views of freedom, democracy, citizenship, or the like.

Roberts’s _Political Companion to Frederick Douglass_ is an important compendium of scholarship on Douglass’s political thought that skillfully sheds lights on critical elements of his political ideas. There are several areas where it misses the opportunity to further dislocate Douglass in productive ways, however. Ironically, in his introduction to the volume Roberts himself identifies these areas as key challenges to assessing Douglass’s political thought. As he correctly observes, the issue of textual selection is key to how we understand any thinker’s contributions, and in