

# The Rhetoric of Reaction

Sergio Schargel\*

Hirschman, Albert O. 2019. *A retórica da intransigência: perversidade, futilidade e ameaça*. 2nd ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. 192 pp.

It is symptomatic that Companhia das Letras republished Albert Hirschman's classic, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, in 2019. In an attempt to understand the wave of reactionary nationalism that has spread across the planet in the last decade, it is remarkable how much a work originally published in the 1990s remains suitable for explaining, albeit partially, contemporary phenomena. Among many successes and some misfires, Hirschman proposes, limited by the scope of less than 200 pages, to analyse over 200 years of reactionary rhetoric, its main reconstructions and its strategies.

In short, as the title itself shows, Hirschman divides reactionary politics into three broad rhetorical groups, each occupying a chapter: the thesis of perversity, the thesis of futility and the thesis of jeopardy. To accomplish this, the author leans more on the discursive aspects than the reactionary practice itself, although both are naturally related, dividing them into three large historical groups: the reaction to the French Revolution, to universal suffrage and to the welfare state. In short, the perversity thesis assumes that any major social change will have the opposite effect of what was intended. To this thesis, Joseph de Maistre's *Considerations on France* is one of the strongest examples, in which the author sadistically interprets that the rationalist drive would eventually self-destruct by pulling men away from God. Following next, Hirschman presents what he labels as the futility thesis, a position that argues that attempts at substantial changes in the social order are doomed to failure. To this thesis, one can think of an example such of the theory of elites, of authors like Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, which empties the desire for change as irrelevant because human societies are formed by natural elites (Hirschman 2019: 63). And, lastly, the jeopardy thesis, a rhetorical manoeuvre similar to the perversity thesis. The main difference, however, is put in its broadest aspect: while perversity criticizes what it sees as the danger of a backlash, jeopardy argues that further changes will jeopardize previous achievements. For example, according to Hirschman (2019: 105), the

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argument, usual during the growth of suffrage movements, that affirmed that democracy would put economic growth at risk.

The first criticism of the book is predictable: how to deal in few pages with over 200 years of a political ideology that, like any concept, rebuilds itself, without falling into the trap of superficiality? It is evident that this does not invalidate the theses discussed – which, on the contrary, are pertinent to understanding reactionary politics from the thought of Maistre to contemporary reactionarism. Hirschman himself is aware of, and apologizes for, an inevitable generalization.

A second possible criticism is the very conceptualization of the term. Hirschman does not differentiate traditional conservatism from reactionarism, putting in the same homogenizing bunch different thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre. Ultimately, yes, it can be argued that they both project a reaction. But while Burke (1982: 61) accepts changes, as long as they are slow and gradual, opposes ruptures based on abstractionism and proposes a social and political construction focused on generational aspects – that is, a creation that undertakes past, present and future, those already dead, the living and those yet to be born –, Maistre (1974) has a stronger relationship with religion, in fact establishing the genesis of reactionarism as an ideology in a desire to return to a past idealized by Providence. There are, therefore, very strong differences between conservatism and reactionarism according to the thoughts of the founding authors of its modern versions. Placing them on the same label deflates their conceptual proposals. However, Hirschman seems to understand reactionarism less as an ideology and more as a discursive strategy.

Finally, a criticism of the title's translation by Companhia das Letras. Although the translation of the rest of the work is decent, a criticism is necessary because in part the translated title contradicts precisely one of Hirschman's attempts in his work. The original title, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, is in unison with what is discussed throughout the text. The translation to the Brazilian version, *The Rhetoric of Intransigence*, distorts the content and implies a value judgment, assuming that the reactionary would necessarily be intransigent. Throughout the work, and even highlighting this attempt at the beginning, the author seeks to distance the notion of reactionarism from its presumed negativity.

Reading *The Rhetoric of Reaction* in 2021, it is possible to say that the book has aged well. It has unavoidable gaps, some of which are highlighted by the author, but it is impressive how its relevance remains to explain a reactionary movement at a world level that began long after its publication. And, in this sense, it does a more complete work than many contemporary authors, like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) or Yascha Mounk (2018), who are so focused on translating the far-right wave as unprecedented that they forget to consider how the past can help explain it. Hirschmann cannot be accused of such a mistake, given that, if *Rhetoric of Reaction* shows anything, reactionary rhetoric is cyclically reconstructed but keeps constant traces. To understand contemporary far-right reactionary politics, it is therefore essential to look at their past counterparts. It is a must-have book for understanding not only this global wave of democratic recession, but even the notion of reactionarism, despite some theoretical jugglery. For, although he may

incur a certain generalization when discussing so much theory compressed in a few pages, Hirschman successfully shows how the rhetorical strategies of reactionarism are repeated and reconstructed, despite the idiosyncrasies of each space-time.

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## About the author

**Sergio Schargel** is a Ph.D candidate in Political Science at UFF. He holds a master's degree in Literature from PUC-Rio and a master's degree in Political Science from Unirio. He was awarded with the Abralic Prize for best thesis within 2020-2021, which resulted in his first book: *O fascismo infinito, no real e na ficção*. His research and artistic production are focused on the relationship between literature and politics, covering themes such as political theory, political literature, fascism, reactionarism, anti-Semitism and the work of Sylvia Serafim Thibau. He is member of the research group Center for Analysis of Institutions, Policies and Reflexions of America, Africa and Asia – CAIPORA.

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