

*Two Hundred Years of Reactionary Rhetoric:  
The Case of the Perverse Effect*

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My lecture will be a progress report on a book I am trying to write. Principally I shall present here the shortened text of its first chapter, but to begin with I would like to tell you about the conception of the work as a whole —as I see it at present.

### GENERAL OUTLINE

My starting point is a famous 1949 lecture by the English sociologist T. H. Marshall on the “development of citizenship” in the West.<sup>1</sup> Marshall distinguished between the civil, political, and social dimensions of citizenship and then proceeded to explain, very much in the spirit of the Whig interpretation of history, how the more enlightened human societies had tackled one of these dimensions after the other, conveniently allocating about one century to each of the three tasks. According to this scheme, the eighteenth century witnessed the major battles for the institution of *civil* citizenship —from freedom of speech, thought, and religion to the right to even-handed justice and other aspects of individual freedom or, roughly, the “Rights of Men” of the natural law doctrine and of the American and French revolutions. In the course of the nineteenth century, it was the *political* aspect of citizenship, that is, the right of citizens to participate in the exercise of political power, that made major strides as the right to vote was extended to ever larger groups. Finally, the rise of the welfare state in the twentieth century extended the concept of citizenship to the *social and economic* sphere, by recognizing that minimal conditions of education, health, economic well-being, and security are basic to the life of a civilized being as well as

<sup>1</sup>“Citizenship and Social Class,” Alfred Marshall Lectures given in Cambridge, England, in 1949, reprinted in T. H. Marshall, *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), chap. 4.

to the meaningful exercise of the civil and political attributes of citizenship.

When Marshall painted this magnificent canvas of staged progress, the third battle for the assertion of citizenship rights, the one being waged on the social and economic terrain, seemed to be well on its way to being won, particularly in the Labor-party-ruled, social-security-conscious England of the immediate postwar period. A generation or so later, it appears that Marshall had been overly optimistic on that score and that the notion of the socioeconomic dimension of citizenship as a natural complement of the civil and political dimensions had run into considerable difficulties and stands in need of substantial rethinking. This point was recently made by Ralf Dahrendorf and it is surely well taken.<sup>2</sup>

But does it go far enough? Is it not true that not just the last but each and every one of Marshall's three progressive thrusts have been followed by ideological counterthrusts of extraordinary force? And have not these counterthrusts been at the origin of convulsive social and political struggles often leading to setbacks for the intended progressive programs as well as to much human suffering and misery? The backlash so far experienced by the welfare state may in fact be rather mild in comparison with the earlier onslaughts and conflicts that followed upon the assertion of individual freedoms in the eighteenth century or upon the broadening of political participation in the nineteenth. Once we contemplate this protracted and perilous seesawing of action and reaction we come to appreciate more than ever the profound wisdom of Whitehead's well-known observation: "[T]he major advances in civilization are processes which all but wreck the societies in which they occur."<sup>3</sup> It is surely this statement rather than any

<sup>2</sup> Dahrendorf was addressing the initial meeting, held in 1985, of a group assembled by the Ford Foundation to consider and make recommendations on social welfare policy. His brief but pointed remarks on that occasion set me off on the present study.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (1927; repr. New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), p. 88.

account of smooth, unrelenting progress that catches the deeply ambivalent essence of the story so blandly entitled the “development of citizenship.”

### THREE REACTIONS

There are good reasons, then, for focusing on the *reactions* to the successive forward thrusts. To start with, I shall briefly state what I understand by the “three reactions,” or reactionary waves, particularly since they may well be more diverse and diffuse than Marshall’s fairly straightforward trio.

The first reaction is the movement of ideas following (and opposing) the assertion of equality before the law and of civil rights in general — Marshall’s civil component of citizenship. There is a major difficulty in isolating this movement: the most emphatic assertion of these rights occurred in the early stages and as a result of the French Revolution so that the contemporary reaction against them was intertwined with opposition to the Revolution and all its works. To be sure, any opposition to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was motivated more by the events that led to the Declaration’s being issued than by the text itself. But the radical counterrevolutionary discourse that soon emerged refused to distinguish between positive and negative aspects of the French Revolution or to concede that there were any positive ones. Anticipating what was later to become a slogan of the Left (*La révolution est un bloc*), the early adversaries of the Revolution considered it as a cohesive whole. Significantly, the first general indictment of the Revolution, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), started with a sustained polemic against the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Taking the ideology of the Revolution seriously, the counterrevolutionary discourse encompassed rejection of the text the revolutionaries were most proud of. In this manner it became a fundamental intellectual current, laying the groundwork for much of the modern conservative position.

The second reactionary wave was much less self-consciously counterrevolutionary or counterreformist than the first. Few writers specifically proclaimed the objective of rolling back the advances of popular participation in politics that were achieved through extensions of the franchise in the nineteenth century. One can nevertheless *construct* an ideological countermovement out of several influential currents that arose at about the time when the major breakthroughs in the struggle for the extension of the franchise occurred. From the last third of the nineteenth century to the First World War and beyond, a vast and diffuse literature —embracing philosophy, psychology, politics, and belles-lettres —amassed every conceivable argument for disparaging the “masses,” the majority, parliamentary rule, and democratic government. Even though it made few proposals for alternative institutions, much of this literature implicitly or explicitly warned of the dire dangers threatening society as a result of the trend to democratization. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to argue that such writings shared in the responsibility for the self-destruction of democracy in Italy and Germany during the inter-war period. To the extent the claim is justified, the second reaction must be given credit, if that is the correct term, for having produced history’s most striking instance of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Curiously, the reaction that was least consciously intent on rolling back the ongoing trends or reforms became the one to have — or to be later accused of having had — the most destructive impact.

We are now coming to the third reactionary wave: the contemporary critique of the welfare state and the attempts to roll back or “reform” some of its provisions. But these topics need not, perhaps, be gone over at this point. As direct, day-to-day observers of this movement we have a certain commonsense understanding of what is involved. At the same time, while a very large literature has by now criticized every aspect of the welfare state from the economic and political points of view, and in spite of

determined assaults upon social welfare programs and institutions by a variety of powerful political forces, it is too early to appraise the outcome of this new reactionary wave.

### THREE "REACTIONARY" THESES

As will be apparent from this brief account, the size of my topic is truly enormous. In trying to get hold of it I must be severely selective. It is therefore useful to point out right away what I am *not* attempting here. In the first place, I shall not write yet another volume on the nature and deep roots of conservative thought. Rather, my aim is to delineate formal types of argument or rhetoric, and my emphasis will thus be on the major polemical postures and maneuvers likely to be engaged in by those who set out to debunk and roll back "progressive" policies and movements of ideas. Second, I am not going to embark on a broad and leisurely historical retelling of the successive reforms and counter-reforms, theses and countertheses since the French Revolution. Rather, I shall focus on common or typical arguments unfailingly made by the three reactive movements just noted. These arguments will constitute the basic subdivision of my text. It is in conjunction with each argument that the "three reactions" will be drawn upon to ascertain the specific shape the argument has taken in various historical contexts.

Which are the arguments and how many are there? I must have an inbred urge toward symmetry. In canvassing for the principal ways of criticizing, assaulting, and ridiculing the three successive "progressive" thrusts of Marshall's story I have come up with another trio: that is, with three reactive-reactionary theses which I call the *perversity thesis*, the *futility thesis*, and the *jeopardy thesis*. Let me explain briefly what I mean by each.

The *perversity thesis*, or *thesis of the perverse effect*—perhaps the most basic and certainly the most elementary, least sophisticated of the three—is closely connected with the semantic origin of the term "reaction." As Starobinski has shown, the couple

“action” and “reaction” came into current usage as a result of Newton’s third law of motion, which asserted that “to every Action there is always opposed an equal Reaction.” Having thus been singled out for distinction in the prestigious science of mechanics, the two concepts spilled over to other realms and were widely used in the analysis of society and history in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

No derogatory meaning whatsoever attached at first to the term “reaction.” The remarkably durable infusion of this meaning took place during the French Revolution and, specifically, after its great watershed, the events of Thermidor.<sup>5</sup> It is already noticeable in Benjamin Constant’s youthful tract *Des reactions politiques*, written in 1797 expressly to denounce what he perceived as a new chapter of the Revolution in which the reactions against the excesses of the Jacobins might themselves engender far worse excesses.<sup>6</sup> This very thought may have contributed to the pejorative meaning that was soon attached to the term “reaction.” A more fundamental reason is that the spirit of the Enlightenment, with its belief in the forward march of history, survived the Revolution, even among its critics, notwithstanding the Terror and other mishaps. One could deplore the “excesses” of the Revolution, as Constant certainly did, and yet continue to believe both in history’s fundamentally progressive design and in the Revolution’s being part of it. Such must have been the dominant contemporary attitude. Otherwise it would be hard to explain why those who “reacted” to the Revolution in a predominantly negative manner came to be perceived and denounced as “reactionaries.”

The semantic exploration of “reaction” points straight to an important characteristic of “reactionary” thinking. Because of the stubbornly progressive temper of the modern era, “reactionaries”

<sup>4</sup> Jean Starobinski, “La vie et les aventures du mot ‘reaction,’” *Modern Language Review* 70 (1975), pp. xxi-xxxi.

<sup>5</sup> F. Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française, des origines à 1900* (Paris: Colin, 1905-53), vol. 9, pt. 2, pp. 843-44.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Ecrits et discours politiques*, ed. O. Pozzo di Borgo (Paris: Jean-Jacque Pauvert, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 21-91.

live in a hostile world. They are up against an intellectual climate that attaches a positive value to the lofty objective proclaimed and actively pursued by their adversaries. Given this state of public opinion, reactionaries are not likely to launch an all-out attack on that objective. Rather, they will endorse it, sincerely or otherwise, but then attempt to demonstrate that the action undertaken in its name is ill-conceived; indeed, they will most typically argue that this action will produce, via a series of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the objective that is being pursued.<sup>7</sup>

This, then, is the thesis of the perverse effect, to which I shall devote the bulk of this lecture. But let me briefly tell you about the remaining two theses.

My second “reactionary” argument is what I call the *futility thesis*. While the thesis of the perverse effect proclaims that the alleged progress will in fact lead to regress, the futility thesis asserts, to the contrary, that the attempt at change is abortive, that in one way or another any change is or was largely surface, facade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the “deep” structures of society remain wholly untouched.

It is curious that the French, rich in revolutionary experiences as they are, should have given this argument its classic epigrammatic expression with the maxim, coined in 1840 by the journalist Alphonse Karr (1808-90), *plus ça change plus c'est La même chose*. Instead of a law of motion we have here a law of no-motion. Turning it into a strategy for avoiding change yields the well-known paradox of the Baron of Lampedusa in his novel *The Leopard*: “Everything must change here so that everything will remain the same.” Both conservatives and, even more, revolutionaries have eagerly adopted this aphorism from Sicilian society as the leitmotif or epigraph for studies that affirm the failure and futility of reform, particularly in Latin America. Finally, there is the inevitable Lewis Carroll, whose equally proverbial saying in

<sup>7</sup> For a broad survey of perverse effects by a sociologist, see Raymond Boudon, *Effets pervers et ordre social* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).

*Alice in Wonderland*, “Here it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place,” expresses yet a different facet of the futility thesis.

All of these spirited statements deride or deny efforts at, and possibilities of, change while underlining and perhaps celebrating the resilience of the status quo. The conservative bias of the epigrams thus serves to offset the opposite bias of language with its derogatory connotation, as just noted, for “reaction” and “reactionary.” It is of course difficult to argue at one and the same time that a certain movement for social change will be sharply counterproductive, in line with the perverse-effect thesis, and will have no effect at all, in line with the futility thesis. For this reason, the two arguments are generally made by different critics.

Nevertheless the *two* arguments have something in common: both are remarkably bald — therein lies, of course, much of their appeal. In both cases it is shown how actions undertaken to achieve a certain purpose miserably fail to do so: either no change occurs at all or the action yields an outcome that is the opposite of the one intended. Then there is a third, more moderate way of arguing against a change which, because of the prevailing state of public opinion, one does not care to attack head-on (this, I have claimed, is one of the hallmarks of “reactionary” thinking) : this one asserts that to move in a certain direction, though feasible and even desirable if viewed in isolation, carries with it unacceptable costs of one sort or another. The trouble with this argument is that it normally involves a difficult and subjective comparison of highly heterogeneous benefits and costs; it will therefore carry less general conviction than a demonstration that an intended change is simply abortive or counterproductive.

The comparison of costs and benefits becomes rather more homogeneous and therefore more compelling when it takes a special, privileged form: that of focusing on a new reform in relation to one that has already been accomplished. If it can be argued that the *two* reforms are in some sense competitive or mutually

exclusive so that the older will be endangered by the new one, then an element of comparability enters into the argument and the evaluation can proceed in vaguely common “coins of progress”: does it make sense to sacrifice the old progress for the new one? Moreover, with this argument the reactionary takes on once again the progressive’s clothes and argues as though both the new and the old progress were desirable, and then shows typically how a new reform, if carried out, would mortally *endanger* an older, highly prized one that has only recently been put into place. The older, hard-won conquests or accomplishments, so it is argued, are still fragile, still need to be consolidated and would be placed in jeopardy by the new program. I therefore call this argument the *jeopardy thesis*: it involves a more complex, historically grounded argument than the other two.

In line with T. H. Marshall’s tripartite division of “progress” into the civil, political, and socioeconomic dimensions of citizenship, the jeopardy thesis should make its *first* fully articulated appearance with the *second* reactionary wave, the one that criticizes the extension of the franchise and of democracy. It will be claimed that this extension imperils the earlier conquest of individual liberty, that undue insistence on participation or “positive liberty” represents a danger for precious “negative liberty.” Next, as the jeopardy thesis is used against the welfare state, it can deploy a double-barreled argument. The welfare state, so it will be argued, is likely to endanger earlier advances with regard to individual rights (the first dimension of citizenship) and also with regard to democratic governance (the second, nineteenth-century dimension). All of these arguments have indeed profusely surfaced, as I hope to demonstrate in due course.

So much by way of an overview of the three theses. I think I will be able to show that jointly they account for the bulk of the arguments in the reactionary arsenal.<sup>8</sup> I now return to the first

<sup>8</sup> I should add that the arguments, particularly the perversity and futility theses, are not the exclusive property of “reactionaries.” Most generally these arguments

thesis, that of the perverse effect, tracing it through the three reactions.

### THE THESIS OF THE PERVERSE EFFECT

The argument of the perverse effect asserts not merely that a movement or policy will fall short of its goal or will occasion unexpected costs or negative side effects: rather, so goes the argument, *the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction*. Being simple, intriguing, and devastating (if true), the argument has proven popular with generations of “reactionaries” as well as fairly effective with the public at large. In current debates it is also often referred to as the counterintuitive or counterproductive effect of some allegedly progressive public policy.

### THE REACTION TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

As with many other key elements of “reactionary” thinking, the argument of the perverse effect was “invented” in the wake of the French Revolution. Actually, there was little need for inventive genius: as *liberté, égalité, fraternité* turned into the dictatorship of the Comité de Salut Public (and later into that of Bonaparte), the thought that certain attempts to reach for liberty are bound to lead to tyranny instead almost forced itself upon one’s mind. What was remarkable was that Edmund Burke predicted such an outcome as early as 1790, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Here he prognosticated that “an ignoble oligarchy, founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the

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will be made by groups that are out of power and oppose or criticize actions, any kind of actions, that are proposed or have already been taken. Whenever “reactionaries” find themselves in power and are able to carry out their own programs and policies, they may in turn be attacked by “liberals” or “progressives” along the lines of the perversity or futility theses, whenever one or the other can be plausibly invoked. Toward the end of the larger work I have in progress, I plan to comment briefly on “liberal” rhetoric, and particularly on its resemblances to, and differences from, the “reactionary” variety I will have surveyed.

people (would) end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and the rights of men.”<sup>9</sup> Also, he conjured up the spectacle of military interventions during various civil disorders and exclaimed, “Massacre, torture, hanging! These are your rights of men!”<sup>10</sup>

The argument took root and was to be repeated in many forms, particularly by foreign observers who were trying to draw “lessons” for their countries from what was happening in France. Thus, Friedrich Schiller wrote in 1793: “The attempt of the French people to install the holy Rights of Man and to conquer political liberty has only brought to light its impotence and unworthiness in this regard; the result has been that not just this unhappy people, but alongside it a considerable part of Europe and a whole century have been thrown back into barbarism and servitude.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most general, if heavy-footed, formulation is that of the German romantic political economist Adam Muller, who proclaimed when the Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath had run their course: “The history of the French Revolution constitutes a proof, administered continuously over thirty years, that man, acting by himself and without religion, is unable to break any chains that oppress him without sinking in the process into still deeper slavery.”<sup>12</sup> Here Burke’s conjectures have been turned into a rigid historical law that could serve as an ideological prop for the Europe of the Holy Alliance.

Burke’s uncanny ability to project the course of the French Revolution has been attributed to the very strength of his pas-

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Chicago: Regnery, 1955), p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of July 13, 1793, to Herzog Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg, in *Schiller’s Briefe*, ed. Fritz Jonas (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1892–96), vol. 3, p. 333.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik*, 2d edition (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1925), p. 170.

sionate engagement with it.<sup>13</sup> But it may be suggested that his formulation of the perverse effect has an intellectual origin as well: he was steeped in the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment which had stressed the importance of the unintended effects of human action. The best-known application of this notion was the Invisible Hand doctrine of Adam Smith, with whose economic views Burke had expressed total agreement.

Smith, like Mandeville and others (such as Pascal and Vico) before him, had shown how individual actions motivated by greed or, less insultingly, by self-interest can have a positive social outcome in the shape of a more prosperous commonwealth. Expressing these ideas with poetic pith toward the end of the century, Goethe defined his Mephisto as “a part of that force that ever wills evil, but ever brings forth good.”

In this manner the intellectual terrain was well prepared for arguing that on occasion the opposite might happen. This was exactly what Burke did when he was faced with the unprecedented undertaking of the French Revolution to reconstruct society: he made good and evil switch places in Mephisto’s statement and asserted that the social outcome of the revolutionaries’ striving for the public good would be evil, calamitous, and wholly contrary to the goals and hopes they were professing.

From one point of view, then, Burke’s proposition looks (and may have looked to him) like a minor variation on a well-known eighteenth-century theme. From another, it was a radical ideological shift from the Enlightenment to romanticism and from optimism about progress to pessimism. It seems possible to me that large-scale and seemingly abrupt ideological shifts often take place in this fashion. Formally they require only a slight modification of familiar patterns of thought, but the new variant has an affinity to very different beliefs and propositions and becomes *embedded* in them to form a wholly new gestalt so that in the end the

<sup>13</sup> By Conor Cruise O’Brien in his introduction to Burke’s *Reflections* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 70–73.

intimate connection between the old and the new is almost unrecognizable.

In the present case the old was the slow emergence of a new kind of hope for world order. From the sixteenth century on it was widely agreed that religious precept and moral admonition could not be relied on to restrain and reshape human nature so as to guarantee social order and economic welfare. But with the rise of commerce and industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, influential voices proposed that some of the very ineradicable “vices” of men, such as persistent self-seeking, could, properly channeled, produce a minimally workable and perhaps even a progressive society. To Pascal, Vico, and Goethe this paradoxical process suggested the intervention of a Providence that is remarkably benign, forgiving, and helpful as it transmutes evil into good. The optimistic message of this construction was enhanced further when the pursuit of self-interest through trade and industry lost its stigma and was accorded social prestige instead. At that point there was no longer a sharp contrast between the means and the end, or between process and outcome, and the need for the magical intervention of Divine Providence became less compelling — Adam Smith in fact barely allowed it to survive, secularized and a bit anemic, as the Invisible Hand.<sup>14</sup>

The thinking about unintended outcomes of human action received a new impulse with the events of the French Revolution. As the strivings for liberty ended up in terror and tyranny, the critics of the Revolution perceived a new and striking disparity between individual intentions and social outcomes. Consequently Divine Providence was pressed back into active service but in a shape that was anything but benign: her task now was to *foil* the

<sup>14</sup> In his 1966 lectures on *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972), and particularly in the third lecture, “The Invisible Hand and Economic Man,” Jacob Viner demonstrates the continued hold teleological thought had on Adam Smith. It is significant, nevertheless, that Smith introduced the secular term “Invisible Hand” as a substitute for the Divine Providence which had long been routinely invoked in previous writings expressing a teleological view of nature and society.

designs of men, whose pretensions to build an ideal society were to be exposed as naive and preposterous, if not as criminal and blasphemous. *Der Mensch in seinem Wahn* (man in his delusion), that “worst of terrors,” as Schiller put it in one of his best-known poems (*Das Lied von der Glocke*), had to be taught a salutary if severe lesson.

Joseph de Maistre in particular endows the Divine Providence he sees at work throughout the Revolution with refined cruelty. In his *Considérations sur la France* (1797) he regards it as a providential development for the Revolution to have generated its own lengthy internecine conflicts; for, so he argues, if there had been an early successful counterrevolution, the revolutionaries would have had to be tried in official courts and then one of two things would have happened: either the verdicts would have been considered excessive by public opinion or, most likely, they would have fallen far short of full justice in being limited to just a few great criminals (*quelques grands coupables*). Here Maistre proclaims: “This is precisely what Providence did not want” and this is why she cleverly arranged matters in such a way that much larger numbers were made to “fall under the blows of their own accomplices.”<sup>15</sup>

Maistre’s construction of Divine Providence is exceptional in its elaborate and expert vengefulness. But the basic feature of the reactionary argument that invokes the “perverse effect” has remained unchanged: man is held up to ridicule —by Divine Providence and by those privileged social analysts who have pierced her designs— for in setting out to improve the world radically he goes radically astray. What better way to show him up as half-foolish and half-criminal than to prove that he is achieving the exact opposite of what he is proclaiming as his objective?

<sup>15</sup> Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, ed. Jean-Louis Darcel (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980), pp. 75, 74.

THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE REACTION TO THE SPREAD  
OF A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL ORDER

The identical line of reasoning surfaces again during our next episode, the broadening of the franchise in the course of the nineteenth century. New reasons for affirming the inevitability of a perverse outcome of that process were now put forward by the emergent social sciences. To appreciate the climate of opinion in which these arguments arose it is useful to recall first contemporary attitudes toward the masses and toward mass participation in politics.

Europe had long been a highly stratified society with the lower classes being held in the utmost contempt by both upper and middle classes. A not particularly aristocratic person like Burke wrote, in the *Reflections*: “The occupation of a hairdresser, or of a working tallow chandler cannot be a matter of honor to any person . . . to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments . . . . the state suffers oppression if such as they . . . are permitted to rule.” Later on, he comments in passing on the “innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed.”<sup>16</sup>

Such remarks, made in an off-hand manner, suggest that Burke’s primary emotion toward the “lower orders” was not so much class antagonism and fear of revolt as utter contempt, a feeling of total separateness, even outright physical revulsion, much as in caste societies. This mood carried over into the nineteenth century and could only have been enhanced by the cityward migration of impoverished rural folk that came with industrialization. Shortly it was indeed compounded with fear as Burke’s “wretches” took to staging violent political outbreaks, particularly in the 1840s. After one such episode in 1845 in nearby Lucerne, the young Jacob Burckhardt wrote from Basel: “Con-

<sup>16</sup>*Reflections*, pp. 75, 228.

ditions in Switzerland —so disgusting and barbarous —have spoilt everything for me and I shall expatriate myself as soon as I can. . . . The word freedom sounds rich and beautiful, but no one should talk about it who has not seen and experienced slavery under the loud-mouthed masses, called the ‘people’ . . . I know too much history to expect anything from the despotism of the masses but a future tyranny, which will mean the end of history.”<sup>17</sup>

It would be easy to collect additional evidence on the extent to which the idea of mass participation in politics, be it in the watered-down form of universal suffrage, seemed aberrant and potentially disastrous to a good part of Europe’s elites. Universal suffrage was one of Flaubert’s favorite *bêtes noires*, a frequent butt for his passionate hatred of human stupidity. With heavy irony, universal suffrage (*suffrage universel*) figures in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* as the “last word of political science”; in his letters he pronounced it “the shame of the human spirit” and the equal of (or worse than) other absurd notions, such as the divine right of kings or the infallibility of the pope.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere in Europe similar feelings prevailed. The more universal suffrage extended its sweep across Europe, the more strident became the elite voices that stood or arose in unreconciled opposition to it. For Nietzsche popular elections were the ultimate expression of the “herd instinct,” a telling term he coined to denigrate all trends toward democratic politics. Even Ibsen, acclaimed in his time as a progressive critic of society, harshly attacked the majority and majority rule. In *An Enemy of the People* (1882), the play’s hero (Dr. Stockmann) thunders: “Who forms the majority in any country? I think we’d all have to agree that the fools are in a terrifying, overwhelming majority all over the world! But in the name of God it can’t be right that the fools should rule the wise! . . . The majority has the power, unfortu-

<sup>17</sup> *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, ed. A. Dru (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* (Paris: Conard, 1930), pp. 282, 33.

nately . . . but the majority is not right! The ones who are right are a few isolated individuals like me! The minority is always right!”<sup>19</sup>

In this manner, the undoubted advance of democratic political forms in the second half of the century took place in the midst of a diffuse mood of skepticism and hostility. Then, toward the century's end, this mood found a more sophisticated expression as medical and psychological discoveries showed human behavior to be motivated by irrational forces to a much greater extent than had been acknowledged before. The idea of basing political governance on universal suffrage could henceforth be exposed as a belated product and, indeed, obsolete relic of the Enlightenment with its abiding belief in the rationality of the individual. This belief would now be denounced not just as “shallow,” the standard romantic critique, but as plain wrong.

Among the several political ideas that can be considered to be, in this manner, “reactions” to the advances of the franchise and of democracy in general, one of the more prominent and influential was articulated by Gustave Le Bon in this best-selling *Psychologie des foules*, first published in 1895. It also exemplifies once again the attraction of “reactionary” thinkers to the perverse effect.

Le Bon's principal argument challenges commonsense understandings in the manner of what is known to economists as the *fallacy of composition*: what applies to the individual, so he argues, does not necessarily hold for the group, much less for the crowd. Impressed by recent medical research findings on infection and hypnosis and unaware of the simultaneously proceeding work of Freud that would shortly show individuals themselves to be subject to all manner of unconscious drives, Le Bon based his theory on a sharp dichotomy between the individual and the crowd: the individual was rational, perhaps sophisticated and

<sup>19</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, act IV.

calculating; the crowd was irrational, easily swayed, unable to weigh pros and cons, given to unreasoning enthusiasms, and so on. Even though occasionally the crowd is accorded some good points because of its ability to engage in acts of selfless abnegation (soldiers in battle), there is no doubt that Le Bon looks at the crowd as a lower, though dangerously vigorous, form of life: “None too good at reasoning, the crowd is on the contrary much given to action.”<sup>20</sup> This action takes typically the form either of anomic outbreaks by “criminal crowds” or of enthusiastic, hypnotic mass movements organized by demagogic leaders who know how to enslave the crowd according to a few simple rules obligingly supplied by Le Bon.

In fin-de-siècle Europe, Le Bon’s theory had obvious political implications. It saw the prospects for national and international order as quite gloomy: with the franchise spreading, Le Bon’s irrational crowds were installed as important actors in an ever-larger number of countries. Moreover, the book’s last two chapters, “Electoral Crowds” and “Parliamentary Assemblies,” supplied various specific arguments against modern mass-based democracy. Here Le Bon does not argue directly against universal suffrage; rather, like Flaubert, he speaks of it as an absurd dogma which is unfortunately bound to cause a great deal of harm just as did earlier superstitious beliefs. “Only time can act on them,” he wrote, assuming the stance of a resigned chronicler of human folly.<sup>21</sup> This nonreformist position then permits Le Bon to outline coldly the disastrous consequences of universal suffrage: anticipating our contemporary “public choice” theorists, he first demonstrates how parliamentary democracy fosters a tendency toward ever more public spending, in response to the pressure of sectional interests. The perverse effect is appealed to in the final, crowning argument of the book: vaunted democracy will increasingly turn

<sup>20</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

into the rule of bureaucracy through the many laws and regulations that are being passed in “the illusion that equality and liberty will be better safeguarded thereby.”<sup>22</sup> In support of these views he cites Herbert Spencer’s book *The Man versus the State* (1884), a collection of late essays. Here was indeed a contemporary scientific authority figure who had taken a strongly conservative turn. Spencer too had chosen the perverse effect as his leitmotif, particularly in the essay entitled “The Sins of Legislators,” where he puts forward an extravagantly general formulation: “uninstructed legislators have in past times continually increased human suffering in their endeavours to mitigate it.”<sup>23</sup>

Once again, then, a group of social analysts found itself irresistibly attracted to deriding those who aspire to change the world for the better. And it is not enough to show that these naive *Weltverbesserer* (world improvers) fall flat on their face: it must be proven that they are actually, if I may coin the corresponding German term, *Weltverschlechterer* (world worseners), that they leave the world in a worse shape than prevailed before any “reform” had been instituted.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the worsening must be shown to occur along the very dimension where there was supposed to be improvement.

#### THE REACTION TO THE RISE OF THE WELFARE STATE

This sort of argument was to achieve special prominence during the third reactionary phase to which I now turn: the present-day assault on the economic and social policies that make up the modern welfare state.

In economics, more so than in the other social and political sciences, the perverse-effect doctrine is closely tied into a central

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus the State* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1940), p. 86

<sup>24</sup>The term *Weltverbesserer* has a derisive meaning in German, probably as a result of the reaction against the Enlightenment.

tenet of the discipline: the idea of a self-regulating market. To the extent that this idea is dominant, any public policy aiming to change market outcomes, such as prices or wages, automatically becomes noxious interference with beneficent equilibrating processes. Even economists who are favorable to some measures of income and wealth redistribution tend to regard the most obvious “populist” measures of that sort as counterproductive.

The perverse effect of specific interferences —a minimum-wage law or the decreeing of a maximum price for bread —has often been argued for by tracing through demand and supply reactions to such measures. As a result of, say, a price stop for bread, it is shown how flour will be diverted to other final uses and how some bread will be sold at black-market prices, so that the average price of bread may go up rather than down as was intended. Similarly, after a minimum wage is imposed less labor will be hired, so that the income of the workers may fall rather than rise.

There is actually nothing certain about such perverse effects. In the case of minimum-wage legislation, in particular, it is conceivable that the underlying demand and supply curves for labor could shift as a result and that the officially imposed rise in wages could have a positive effect on labor productivity and consequently on employment. But the mere possibility of demonstrating an outright perverse outcome as the first-order effect of interferences with market outcomes —under the famous *ceteris paribus* clause of partial equilibrium reasoning —makes for a powerful debating point which is bound to be brought up in any polemic.

The long discussion about problems of social assistance to the poor provides ample illustration. Such assistance is admittedly and often self-consciously rank interference with “market outcomes” that assign some members of society to the low end of the income scale. The economic argument on the ensuing perverse effects was first put forward during the debates about the Poor Laws in England. The critics of these laws, from Defoe to Burke, and from Malthus to Tocqueville, scoffed at the notion that the

Poor Laws were merely a “safety net,” to use a current term, for those who had fallen behind, through no fault of their own, in the race for a livelihood. Given the human “proclivity to idleness,” to use Mandeville’s phrase, this “naive” view neglected the supply reactions, the incentives built into the arrangement: the availability of the assistance, so it was argued, acts as a positive encouragement to “sloth” and “depravity,” and thus *produces* poverty instead of relieving it. Here is a typical formulation of this point by an early nineteenth-century English essayist:

The Poor-laws were intended to prevent mendicants; they have made mendicancy a legal profession; they were established in the spirit of a noble and sublime provision, which contained all the theory of Virtue; they have produced all the consequences of Vice. . . . The Poor-laws, formed to relieve the distressed, have been the arch-creator of distress.<sup>25</sup>

A century and a half later, one reads in the most highly publicized attack on the welfare state in the United States, Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* (1984) :

We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty and inadvertently built a trap.<sup>26</sup>

Except for a slight toning down of nineteenth-century coloratura, the melody is exactly the same. The perverse effect would seem to work unremittingly under both early and late capitalism.

Not that the ideological scene has remained unchanged throughout these 150 years. The success of Murray’s book owes in fact much to the rather fresh look of its principal point, epitomized in its title —almost any idea that hasn’t been around for a

<sup>25</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English* (New York: Harper, 1833), vol. 1, p. 129. Part of this passage is cited in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 172.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: America’s Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 9.

long time has a good chance of being mistaken for an original insight. What actually happened is that the idea went into hiding, for reasons that are of some interest to our story.

As Karl Polanyi showed memorably in *The Great Transformation* (1944), the English Poor Laws, especially as supplemented and reinforced by the Speenhamland Act of 1795, represented a last-ditch attempt to rein in, through public assistance, the free market for labor and its effects on the poorest strata of society. By supplementing low wages, particularly in agriculture, the new scheme helped to ensure social peace and to sustain domestic food production during the age of the Napoleonic Wars.

But once the emergency was over, the accumulating drawbacks of the system of combining relief and wages came under strong attack. Supported by belief in the new political economy “laws” of Bentham, Malthus, and Ricardo, the reaction against the Speenhamland Act became so strong that in 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act (or “New Poor Law”) fashioned the workhouse into the exclusive instrument of social assistance. In response to the critics of the more generous earlier system, workhouse assistance was now organized so as to do away once and for all with any conceivable perverse effect. To this end, the new arrangements were meant to deter the poor from resorting to public assistance and to stigmatize those who did by “imprisoning [them] in workhouses, compelling them to wear special garb, separating them from their families, cutting them off from communication with the poor outside and, when they died, permitting their bodies to be disposed of for dissection.”<sup>27</sup>

It was not long before this new regime aroused in turn the most violent criticism. As early as 1837 Disraeli inveighed against it in his election campaign: “I consider that this Act has disgraced the country more than any other upon record. Both a moral crime

<sup>27</sup> This is a paraphrase of a passage in William Cobbett’s tract *A Legacy to Labourers* (1834), quoted in Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 211.

and a political blunder, it announces to the world that in England poverty is a crime.”<sup>28</sup>

Critics of the law came from a wide spectrum of opinion and social groups. A particularly powerful and influential indictment was Charles Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist*, published in 1837–38. A strong anti-Poor Law movement arose, complete with demonstrations and riots, during the decade following enactment and, as a result, the provisions of the law were not fully applied, especially in the north, the center of both the opposition and the textile industry.<sup>29</sup> It became uncomfortably clear that there were many evils —loss of community, forgoing of common decency, and internal strife —that could be worse than the alleged “promotion of idleness” whose elimination had been so singlemindedly pursued by the 1834 statute.

The experience with the New Poor Law was so searing that the argument which had presided over its adoption —essentially claiming the perverse effect of social welfare assistance —remained discredited for a long time. This may in fact be one reason for the rather smooth, if slow, emergence of welfare-state legislation in England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Eventually, however, the argument reappeared, particularly in the United States. But even in this country it was not put forward at first in its crude form as in the statement already cited from Murray’s *Losing Ground*. Rather, it looks as though, to be reintroduced into polite company, the old-fashioned perverse effect needed some special, sophisticated attire. Thus, one of the early general attacks on social welfare policy in this country had the intriguing title “Counterintuitive Behavior of Social Systems.”<sup>30</sup> Written by Jay W. Forrester, a pioneer in the simulation of social

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> See Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press), 1971.

<sup>30</sup> *Technology Review* 73, no. 3 (Jan. 1971).

processes by computer models and an influential adviser to the Club of Rome, the article is a good example of what the French call “intellectual terrorism.” At the outset the reader is told that he or she has a very poor chance of understanding how society works, since we are dealing with “complex and highly interacting systems,” with social arrangements that “belong to the class called multi-loop non-linear feedback systems” and similar arcane “system dynamics” that “the human mind is not adapted to interpreting.” Only the highly trained computer specialist can unravel these mysteries. And what revelations does he come up with? “At times programs cause exactly the reverse of desired results.” In other words, Joseph de Maistre’s vengeful Divine Providence has returned to the stage in the guise of Forrester’s “feedback-loop dynamics,” and the result is identical: any human attempt to improve society only makes matters worse!

In an influential article, also written in 1971 and entitled “The Limits of Social Policy,” Nathan Glazer joined Forrester in invoking the perverse effect, proclaiming, “Our efforts to deal with distress themselves increase distress.”<sup>31</sup> In justification Glazer does not appeal to computer models, spelling out instead some plain sociological reasons. Welfare-state policies, so he argues, are meant to deal with distress that used to be taken care of by traditional structures such as the family, the church, or the local community. As these structures break down, the state comes in to take over their functions. In the process, the state causes further weakening of what remains of the traditional structures. Hence the situation is getting worse rather than better.

But Glazer’s reasoning was too softly “sociological” for the harder conservative mood that became fashionable during the eighties. Charles Murray’s formulation of the perverse effect of social welfare policy returned to the blunt reasoning of the proponents of Poor Law reform in early nineteenth-century England.

<sup>31</sup> *Commentary* 52, no. 3 (Sept. 1971): 52.

Inspired, like them, by the simplest economic verities, he argued that public assistance to the poor, as available in the United States, acts as an irresistible incentive to those working or potentially working at low wages or salaries (his famous “Harold” and “Phyllis”) to flock to the welfare rolls and to stay there —to become forever “trapped” in sloth and poverty.

#### CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PERVERSE EFFECT

Just as earlier I have not controverted Burke or Le Bon, it is not my purpose here to discuss the substance of the various arguments against social welfare policies in the United States and elsewhere. What I have tried to show is how the protagonists of this “reactionary” episode, just as those of the earlier ones, have been powerfully attracted time and again by the same form of reasoning, that is, the claim of the perverse effect. I must apologize for the monotony of my account, but it was deliberate, for in it lies the demonstration of my point that invocation of the perversity thesis is a basic characteristic of “reactionary” thought. This reiteration of the argument may, however, have had the unfortunate effect of conveying the impression that situations exhibiting perversity are in fact ubiquitous. Actually, my intention is to put forward two propositions of equal weight: (1) the perverse effect is widely appealed to by reactionary thought, *and* (2) it is unlikely to exist “in nature” to anything like the extent that is claimed. I shall now speak —much more briefly —to the second proposition.

One of the great insights of the science of society —found already in Vico and Mandeville and elaborated magisterially during the Scottish Enlightenment —is the observation that, because of imperfect foresight, human actions are apt to have unintended consequences of considerable scope.

The perverse effect is a special and extreme case of the unintended consequence. Here the failure of foresight of the ordinary human actors is well-nigh total as their actions are shown to produce precisely the opposite of what was intended; the social scien-

tists analyzing the perverse effect, on the other hand, experience a great feeling of superiority —and revel in it. Maistre naively said as much when he exclaimed in his gruesome chapter on the prevalence of war in human history, “It is sweet (*doux*) to fathom the design of the Godhead in the midst of general cataclysm.”<sup>32</sup>

But the very *douceur* and self-flattery of this situation should put the analysts of the perverse effect, as well as the rest of us, on guard: could they be embracing the effect for the express purpose of feeling good about themselves? In any event, are *they* not suffering from an attack of hubris when they are portraying ordinary humans as wholly groping in the dark, while in contrast they themselves are made to look so remarkably perspicuous? And, finally, are they not rendering their task too easy by focusing on just one privileged and simplistic outcome of a program or a policy —the opposite of the intended one? For it can be argued that the perverse effect, which appears to be a mere variant of the concept of unintended consequences, is in one important respect its denial and even its betrayal. The concept of unintended consequences originally introduced uncertainty and open-endedness into social thought, but the exponents of the perverse effect retreat to viewing the social universe as wholly predictable by means of a rather transparent maneuver.

There is no denying, to be sure, that perverse effects do show up here and there. By intimating that the effect is likely to be invoked for reasons that have little to do with its intrinsic truth value, I merely intended to raise some doubts about its occurring with the frequency that is claimed. I shall now bolster these doubts in a more straightforward way by suggesting that the perverse effect is by no means the only conceivable variety of unintended consequences and side effects.

In the first place, as Adam Smith and Goethe tried to teach us, there are unintended consequences or side effects of human actions

<sup>32</sup> *Considérations*, p. 95.

that are *welcome*. But we do not pay much attention to them as they do not pose problems that have to be urgently addressed.

Second, account should be taken of those actions, policies, or inventions that are comparatively devoid of unintended consequences, welcome or otherwise. Given our preoccupation with side effects, these situations tend to be entirely neglected. For example, those who emphasize the perverse incentives contained in unemployment benefits or welfare payments never mention that large areas of social assistance are impervious to the “supply response” that is at the bottom of whatever perverse effect may be at work: people are unlikely to gouge out their eyes, or to mutilate themselves in an industrial accident in order to qualify for the corresponding types of social security benefits.

Finally, we must turn to situations where secondary or side effects *detract* from the intended effect of some purposeful action. In this situation we are getting closer to the perverse case. But the typical outcome here is one where some positive margin survives the onslaught of the negative side effect. A few examples will be useful. The introduction and compulsory use of seatbelts may make some drivers relax their vigilance and in this way be responsible for some accidents that would not have otherwise occurred; but it is quite unlikely that the total number of fatal accidents will actually go up rather than down when this cautionary measure is introduced. Devaluation of the currency, designed to improve the balance of payments, will be more or less effective in this task depending on the extent to which the positive first-order effects of the devaluation are counteracted by its inflationary impact; but once again such second-order effects are unlikely to swamp the first-order ones.

There is in fact something intrinsically plausible about this type of outcome and correspondingly implausible about the perverse effect occurring with considerable frequency. This is so at least to the extent that policy-making is a repetitive, incremental activity: under such conditions yesterday’s experiences are con-

tinually incorporated into today's decisions, so that tendencies toward perversity stand a good chance of being detected and corrected.<sup>33</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The thesis of the perverse effect is probably the most striking, effective, and popular of the three reactive/reactionary theses which I shall deal with in the larger work I have in progress. At the end of that exercise I hope that I will have convinced the reader that it is worthwhile to trace these theses through the debates of the last two hundred years, if only to marvel at certain invariants in argument and rhetoric, just as Flaubert liked to marvel at the invariant *bêtise* of his contemporaries. To show how the participants in these debates are caught by compelling reflexes and lumber predictably through certain set motions and maneuvers —this is perhaps fulfilling enough for the historian of ideas. As for myself, unreconstructed, if modest, *Weltverbesserer* (world improver) that I am, I must confess to having slightly higher ambitions. Once before, I expressed the hope that one conceivable

<sup>33</sup> In a different context I battled the excessive claims of the perversity thesis many years ago. In *Journeys toward Progress* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1963) I studied three protracted policy problems in three Latin American countries. One of them was the process of land-tenure reform in Colombia; an important episode of that process was a land reform law ("Law 200") of 1936 which was aimed at turning tenants into owners and at improving the conditions of rural dwellers in various other ways. According to most local accounts, the effects of the reform were wholly perverse: the passage of the law caused the landowners to eject their tenants from lands they had rented, thereby converting them into landless laborers. I became suspicious of the automatic, knee-jerk way in which such assertions of perversity peppered historical accounts, newspaper articles, and political speeches of both conservatives and radicals. Upon researching the historical record I became certain that Law 200 had been unjustly defamed and that it had a variety of useful accomplishments to its credit (see *Journeys*, pp. 107–13).

This and similar experiences with the way public-policy experiences are assimilated and history is written in Latin America made me suggest (pp. 240–46) that policy analysis and historiography are strongly imprinted there with some deep-set failure complex, and I later coined the term "fracasomania" to denote the trait. I now realize that this geographical or cultural interpretation was too narrow. Arguing along the lines of the perversity thesis, as was done so insistently by the Colombian commentators on Law 200, has many attractions for parties (such as our "reactionaries") who are not necessarily affected by fracasomania.

usefulness of the history of ideas might be, not to resolve issues, but to raise the level of the debate. This could again apply in the present case.

First of all, my account and critique of the lines of argument most commonly used on behalf of reactive/reactionary causes could serve to make advocates of such causes a bit reluctant to trot out these same arguments over again and inclined to plead their case with greater originality, sophistication, and restraint. Second, my exercise could have an even more useful impact on reformers and sundry progressives. They are given notice here of the kinds of arguments and objections that are most likely to be raised against their programs. Hence, they may be impelled to take extra care in guarding against conceivable perverse effects and other problematic consequences, as detailed in my script.

In counterpart to these hopes, my work might have one assuredly unintended consequence: being a treatise of standard objections to progressive moves, it could be used as a textbook of reactionary rhetoric, as a sort of “reaction for beginners.” Fortunately I am not much of a textbook writer, nor does my work much appeal to the type, so perhaps I need not worry unduly on that score.