

Reactionary Philosophy in an Enormous, Planet-sized Nutshell

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Intro

I have heard the following from a bunch of people, one of whom was me six months ago: “I keep on reading all these posts by really smart people who identify as Reactionaries, and I don’t have any idea what’s going on. They seem to be saying things that are either morally repugnant or utterly ridiculous. And when I ask them to explain, they say it’s complicated and there’s no one summary of their ideas. Why don’t they just write one?”

Part of me secretly thinks part of the answer is that a lot of these beliefs are not argument but poetry. Try to give a quick summary of Shelley’s *Adonais*: “Well there’s this guy, and he’s dead, and now this other guy is really sad.” One worries something has been lost. And just as well try to give a quick summary of the sweeping elegaic paeans to a bygone age of high culture and noble virtues that is Reaction.

But there is some content, and some of it is disconcerting. I started reading a little about Reaction after incessantly being sent links to various [Mencius Moldbug](#) posts, and then started hanging out in an IRC channel with a few Reactionaries (including the infamous Konkvistador) whom I could question about it. Obviously this makes me the world expert who is completely qualified to embark on the hitherto unattempted project of explaining it to everyone else.

Okay, maybe not. But the fact is, I’ve been itching to present an argument against Reactionary thought for a long time, but have been faced with the dual problem of not really having a solid target and worrying that everyone not a Reactionary would think I was wasting my time even talking to them. Trying to sum up their ideas seems like a good way to first of all get a reference point for what their ideas are, and second of all to make it clearer why I think they deserve a rebuttal.

We’ll start with the meta-level question of how confident we should be that our society is better than its predecessors in important ways. Then we’ll look on the object level about how we compare to past societies along dimensions we might care about. We’ll make a lengthy digression into social justice issues, showing how some traditional societies were actually more enlightened than our own in this area. Having judged past societies positively, we’ll then look at what aspects of their cultures, governments, and religions made them so successful, and whether we could adopt those to modern life.

Much of this will be highly politically incorrect and offensive, because that’s what Reactionaries *do*. I have tried to be charitable towards these ideas, which means this post will be pushing politically incorrect and offensive positions. If you do not want to read it, especially the middle parts which are about race, I would totally understand that. But if you do read it and accuse me of holding these ideas myself and get really angry, then [you fail at reading comprehension forever](#).

I originally planned to follow this up tomorrow with the post containing my arguments against these positions, but this argument took longer than I thought to write and I expect the counterargument will as

well. Expect a post critiquing reactionary ideas sometime in the next...week? month?

In any case, this is not that post. This is the post where I argue that modern society is rotten to the core, and that the only reasonable solution is to dig up King James II, clone him, and give the clone absolute control over everything.

No One Expects The Spanish Inquisition, Especially Not In 21st Century America

People in ancient societies thought their societies were obviously great. The imperial Chinese thought nothing could beat imperial China, the medieval Spaniards thought medieval Spain was a singularly impressive example of perfection, and Communist Soviets were pretty big on Soviet Communism. Meanwhile, we think 21st-century Western civilization, with its democracy, secularism, and ethnic tolerance is pretty neat. Since the first three examples now seem laughably wrong, we should be suspicious of the hypothesis that *we* finally live in the one era whose claim to have gotten political philosophy right is *totally justified*.

But it seems like we have an advantage they don't. Speak out against the Chinese Empire and you lose your head. Speak out against the King of Spain and you face the Inquisition. Speak out against Comrade Stalin and you get sent to Siberia. The great thing about western liberal democracy is that it has a free marketplace of ideas. *Everybody* criticizes some aspect of our society. Noam Chomsky made a career of criticizing our society and became rich and famous and got a cushy professorship. So our advantage is that we admit our society's imperfections, reward those who point them out, and so keep inching closer and closer to this ideal of perfect government.

Okay, back up. Suppose you went back to Stalinist Russia and you said "You know, people just don't respect Comrade Stalin enough. There isn't enough Stalinism in this country! I say we need *two* Stalins! No, *fifty* Stalins!"

Congratulations. You have found a way to criticize the government in Stalinist Russia and *totally get away with it*. Who knows, you might even get that cushy professorship.

If you "criticize" society by telling it to keep doing exactly what it's doing only much much more so, society recognizes you as an ally and rewards you for being a "bold iconoclast" or "having brave and revolutionary new ideas" or whatever. It's only when you tell them something they *actually don't want to hear* that you get in trouble.

Western society has been moving gradually further to the left for the past several hundred years at least. It went from divine right of kings to constitutional monarchy to libertarian democracy to federal democracy to New Deal democracy through the civil rights movement to social democracy to ????. If you catch up to society as it's pushing leftward and say "Hey guys, I think we should go leftward even faster! Two times faster! No, *fifty* times faster!", society will call you a bold revolutionary iconoclast and give you a professorship.

If you start suggesting maybe it should switch directions and move the direction opposite the one the engine is pointed, *then* you might have a bad time.

Try it. Mention that you think we should undo something that's been done over the past century or two.

Maybe reverse women's right to vote. Go back to sterilizing the disabled and feeble-minded. If you *really* need convincing, suggest re-implementing segregation, or how about slavery? See how far freedom of speech gets you.

In America, it will get you fired from your job and ostracized by nearly everyone. Depending on how loudly you do it, people may picket your house, or throw things at you, or commit violence against you which is then excused by the judiciary because obviously they were provoked. Despite the iconic image of the dissident sent to Siberia, this is how the Soviets dealt with most of *their* iconoclasts too.

If you absolutely insist on imprisonment, you can always go to Europe, where there are more than enough "hate speech" laws on the book to satisfy your wishes. But a system of repression that doesn't involve obvious state violence is little different in effect than one that does. It's simply more efficient and harder to overthrow.

Reaction isn't a conspiracy theory; it's not suggesting there's a secret campaign for organized repression. To steal an example from the other side of the aisle, it's positing something more like patriarchy. Patriarchy doesn't have an actual Patriarch coordinating men in their efforts to keep down women. It's just that when lots of people share some really strong cultural norms, they manage to self-organize into a kind of immune system for rejecting new ideas. And Western society just happens to have a really strong progressivist immune system ready to gobble you up if you say anything insufficiently progressive.

And so the main difference between modern liberal democracy and older repressive societies is that older societies repressed things you liked, but modern liberal democracies only repress things you don't like. Having only things you don't like repressed looks from the inside a lot like there being no repression at all.

The good Catholic in medieval Spain doesn't feel repressed, even when the Inquisition drags away her neighbor. She feels like decent people have total freedom to worship whichever saint they want, total freedom to go to whatever cathedral they choose, total freedom to debate who the next bishop should be – oh, and thank goodness someone's around to deal with those crazy people who are trying to damn the rest of us to Hell. We medieval Spaniards are way too smart to fall for the [balance fallacy](#)!

Wait, You Mean The Invisible Multi-Tentacled Monster That Has Taken Over All Our Information Sources Might Be Trying To *Mislead* Us?

Since you are a citizen of a repressive society, you should be extremely skeptical of all the information you get from schools, the media, and popular books on any topic related to the areas where active repression is occurring. That means at *least* politics, history, economics, race, and gender. You should be *especially* skeptical of any book that's praised as "a breath of fresh air" or "a good counter to the prevailing bias", as books that garner praise in the media are probably of the "We need fifty Stalins!" variety.

This is not nearly as paranoid as it sounds. Since race is the most taboo subject in our culture, it will also be the simplest example. Almost all of our hard data on race comes from sociology programs in universities — ie the most liberal departments in the most liberal institutions in the country. Most of these sociology departments have an explicit mission statement of existing to fight racism. Many sociologists studying race will tell you quite openly that they went into the field — which is not especially high-paying or prestigious — in order to help crusade against the evil of racism.

Imagine a Pfizer laboratory whose mission statement was to prove Pfizer drugs had no side effects, and whose staff all went into pharmacology specifically to help crusade against the evil of believing Pfizer's drugs have side effects. Imagine that this laboratory hands you their study showing that the latest Pfizer drug has zero side effects, c'mon, trust us! Is there *any way* you're taking that drug?

We know that a lot of medical research, especially medical research by drug companies, turns up the wrong answer simply through the file-drawer effect. That is, studies that turn up an exciting result everyone wants to hear get published, and studies that turn up a disappointing result don't — either because the scientist never submits it to the journals, or because the journal doesn't want to publish it. If this happens *all the time* in medical research despite growing safeguards to prevent it, how often do you think it happens in sociological research?

Do you think the average sociologist selects the study design most likely to turn up evidence of racist beliefs being correct, or the study design most likely to turn up the opposite? If despite her best efforts a study does turn up evidence of racist beliefs being correct, do you think she's going to submit it to a major journal with her name on it for everyone to see? And if by some bizarre chance she does submit it, do you think the *International Journal Of We Hate Racism So We Publish Studies Proving How Dumb Racists Are* is going to cheerfully include it in their next edition?

And so when people triumphantly say "Modern science has completely disproven racism, there's not a shred of evidence in support of it", we should consider that exactly the same level of proof as the guy from 1900 who said "Modern science has completely proven racism, there's not a shred of evidence against it". The field is still just made of people pushing their own dogmatic opinions and calling them

science; only the dogma has changed.

And although Reactionaries love to talk about race, in the end race is nothing more than a particularly strong and obvious taboo. There are taboos in history, too, and in economics, and in political science, and although they're less obvious and interesting they still mean you need this same skepticism when parsing results from these fields. "But every legitimate scientist disagrees with this particular Reactionary belief!" should be said with the same intonation as "But every legitimate archbishop disagrees with this particular heresy."

This is not intended as a proof that racism is correct, or even as the slightest shred of evidence for that hypothesis (although a lot of Reactionaries are, in fact, racist as heck). No doubt the Spanish Inquisition found a couple of real Satanists, and probably some genuine murderers and rapists got sent to Siberia. Sometimes, once in a blue moon, a government [will even censor an idea that happens to be false](#). But it's still useful to know when something is being censored, so you don't actually think the absence of evidence for one side of the story is evidence of anything other than people on that side being smart enough to keep their mouths shut.

The Past Is A First World Country

Even so, isn't the evidence that modern society beats past societies kiiiind of overwhelming? We're richer, safer, healthier, better educated, freer, happier, more equal, more peaceful, and more humane. Reactionary responses to these claims might get grouped into three categories.

The first category is "Yes, obviously". Most countries do seem to have gotten about 100x wealthier since the year 1700. Disease rates have plummeted, and life expectancy has gone way up – albeit mostly due to changes in infant mortality. But this stands entirely explained by technology. So we're a hundred times wealthier than in 1700. In what? Gold and diamonds? Maybe that has something to do with the fact that today we're digging our gold mines with one of these:



...and in 1700 they had to dig their gold mines with one of these:



Likewise, populations are healthier today because they can get computers to calculate precisely targeted radiation bursts that zap cancer while sparing healthy tissue, whereas in 1700 the pinnacle of medical technology was leeches.

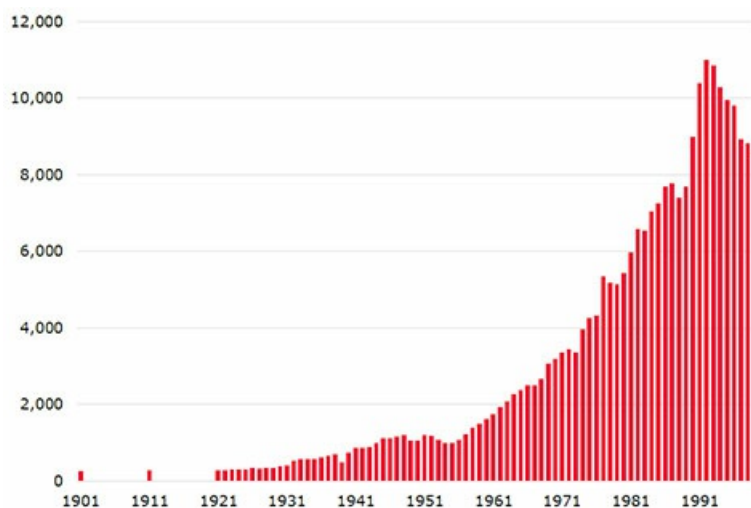
This technology dividend appears even in unexpected places. The world is more peaceful today, but how much of that is the existence of global trade networks that make war unprofitable, video reporting of every casualty that makes war unpopular, and nuclear and other weapons that make war unwinnable?

The second category is “oh really?”. Let’s take safety. This is one of Mencius Moldbug’s pet issues, and he likes to quote the following from an 1876 century text on criminology:

Meanwhile, it may with little fear of contradiction be asserted that there never was, in any nation of which we have a history, a time in which life and property were so secure as they are at present in England. The sense of security is almost everywhere diffused, in town and country alike, and it is in marked contrast to the sense of insecurity which prevailed even at the beginning of the present century. There are, of course, in most great cities, some quarters of evil repute in which assault and robbery are now and again committed. There is perhaps to be found a lingering and flickering tradition of the old sanctuaries and similar resorts. But any man of average stature and strength may wander about on foot and alone, at any hour of the day or the night, through the greatest of all cities and its suburbs, along the high roads, and through unfrequented country lanes, and never have so much as the thought of danger thrust upon him, unless he goes out of his way to court it.

Moldbug then usually contrasts this with whatever recent news article has struck his fancy about entire inner-city neighborhoods where the police are terrified to go, teenagers being mowed down in crossfire among gangs, random daylight murders, and the all the other joys of life in a 21st century British ghetto.

Of course, the plural of anecdote is not data, but the British crime statistics seem to bear him out:



(recorded offenses per 100,000 people, from [source](#))

If this is true, it is true *despite* technology. If crime rates have in fact multiplied by a factor of...well, it looks like at least 100x...this is true even though the country as a whole has gotten vastly richer, even though there are now CCTVs, DNA testing, police databases, heck, even fingerprinting hadn’t been figured out yet in 1876.

This suggests that there was something inherent about Victorian society, politics, or government that made their Britain a safer place to live than modern progressive Britain.

Education is another example of something we're pretty sure we do better in. Now take a look at the [1899 entrance exam for Harvard](#). Remember, no calculators — they haven't been invented yet.

I got an SAT score well above that of the average Harvard student today (I still didn't get into Harvard, because I was a slacker in high school). But I couldn't even *begin* to take much of that test.

Okay, fine. Argue “Well, of course we don't value Latin and Greek and arithmetic and geometry and geography today, we value different things.” So fine. Tell me what the heck you think our high school students are learning that's just as difficult and impressive as the stuff on that test that you don't expect the 19th century Harvard students who aced that exam knew two hundred times better (and don't say “the history of post-World War II Europe”).

Do you honestly think the student body for whom that exam was a fair ability test would be befuddled by the *reading comprehension* questions that pass for entrance exams today? Or would it be more like “Excuse me, teacher, I'm afraid there's been a mistake. My exam paper is in English.”

As a fun exercise, read through Wikipedia's [list of multilingual presidents of the United States](#). We start with entries like this one:

Thomas Jefferson read a number of different languages. In a letter to Philadelphia publisher Joseph Delaplaine on April 12, 1817, Jefferson claimed to read and write six languages: Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, and English. After his death, a number of other books, dictionaries, and grammar manuals in various languages were found in Jefferson's library, suggesting that he studied additional languages beyond those he spoke and wrote well. Among these were books in Arabic, Gaelic, and Welsh.

and this one:

John Quincy Adams went to school in both France and the Netherlands, and spoke fluent French and conversational Dutch. Adams strove to improve his abilities in Dutch throughout his life, and at times translated a page of Dutch a day to help improve his mastery of the language. Official documents that he translated were sent to the Secretary of State of the United States, so that Adams' studies would serve a useful purpose as well. When his father appointed him United States Ambassador to Prussia, Adams dedicated himself to becoming proficient in German in order to give him the tools to strengthen relations between the two countries. He improved his skills by translating articles from German to English, and his studies made his diplomatic efforts more successful. In addition to the two languages he spoke fluently, he also studied Italian, though he admitted to making little progress in it since he had no one with whom to practice speaking and hearing the language. Adams also read Latin very well, translated a page a day of Latin text, and studied classical Greek in his spare time.

eventually proceeding to entries more like this one:

George W. Bush speaks some amount of Spanish, and has delivered speeches in the language. His speeches in Spanish have been imperfect, with English dispersed throughout. Some pundits, like Molly Ivins, have pointedly questioned the extent to which he could speak the language, noting that he kept to similar phrasing in numerous appearances.

and this one:

Barack Obama himself claims to speak no foreign languages. However, according to the President of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, during a telephone conversation Obama was able to deliver a basic four-word question in “fluent Indonesian”, as well as mention the names for a few Indonesian food items. He also knows some Spanish, but admits to only knowing “15 words” and having a poor knowledge of the language.

A real Reactionary would no doubt point out that even old-timey US Presidents aren’t old-timey enough, and that we really should be looking at the British aristocracy, but this is left as an exercise for the reader.

It may be argued that yes, maybe their aristocracy was more educated than our upper-class, but we compensate for the imbalance by having education spread much more widely among the lower-classes. I endorse this position, as do, I’m sure, the hundreds of inner-city minority youth who are no doubt reading this blog post because of the massive interest in abstract political philosophy their schooling has successfully inspired in them.

Once again, today we have Wikipedia, the Internet, and as many cheap books as Amazon can supply us. Back in the old days they had to make do with whatever they could get from their local library. Even more troubling, today we start with a huge advantage – the Flynn Effect has made our average IQ 10 to 20 points higher than in 1900. Yet once again, even with our huge technological and biological head start, we are *still* doing worse than the Old Days, which suggest that here, too, the Old Days may have had some kind of social/political advantage.

So several of our claims of present superiority — wealth, health, peace, et cetera — have been found to be artifacts of higher technology levels. Several other claims — safety and education — have been found to be just plain wrong. That just leaves a few political advantages — namely, that we are freer, less racist, less sexist, less jingoistic and more humane. And the introduction has already started poking holes in the whole “freedom” thing.

That leaves our progress in tolerance, equality, and humaneness. Are these victories as impressive as we think?

Every Time I Hear The Word “Revolver”, I Reach For My Culture

[TRIGGER WARNING: This is the part with the racism]

One of the most solid results from social science has been large and persistent differences in outcomes across groups. Of note, these differences are highly correlated by goodness: some groups have what we would consider “good outcomes” in many different areas, and others have what we would consider “bad outcomes” in many different areas. Crime rate, drug use, teenage pregnancy, IQ, education level, median income, health, mental health, and whatever else you want to measure.

The best presentation of this result is [The Spirit Level](#), even though the book *thinks* it’s proving something completely different. But pretty much any study even vaguely in this field will show the same effect. This also seems to be the intuition behind our division of countries into “First World” and “Third World”, and behind our division of races into “privileged” and “oppressed” (rather than “well, some races have good outcomes in some areas, but others have good outcomes in other areas, so it basically all balances out”) I don’t think this part should be very controversial. Let’s call this mysterious quality “luck”, in order to remain as agnostic as possible about the cause.

Three very broad categories of hypothesis have been proposed to explain luck differences among groups: the external, the cultural, and the biological.

The externalists claim that groups differ only because of the situations they find themselves in. Sometimes these situations are natural. Jared Diamond makes a cogent case for the naturalist externalist hypothesis in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The Chinese found themselves on fertile agricultural land with lots of animals and plants to domesticate and lots of trade routes to learn new ideas from. The New Guinea natives found themselves in a dense jungle without many good plants or animals and totally cut off from foreign contact. Therefore, the Chinese developed a powerful civilization and the New Guineans became a footnote to history.

But in modern times, externalists tend to focus more on external *human* conditions like colonialism and oppression. White people are lucky not because of any inherent virtue, but because they had a head start and numerical advantage and used this to give themselves privileges which they deny to other social groups. Black people are unlucky not because of any inherent flaw, but because they happened to be stuck around white people who are doing everything they can to oppress them and keep them down. This is true both within societies, where unlucky races are disprivileged by racism, and across societies, where unlucky countries suffer the ravages of colonialism.

The culturalists claim that luck is based on the set of implicit traditions and beliefs held by different groups. The Chinese excelled not only because of their fertile landscape, but because their civilization valued scholarship, wealth accumulation, and nonviolence. The New Guineans must have had less useful

values, maybe ones that demanded strict conformity with ancient tradition, or promoted violence, or discouraged cooperation.

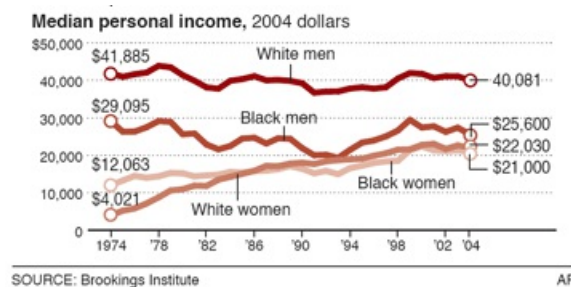
Like the externalists, they trace this forward to the present, saying that the values that served the Chinese so well in building Chinese civilization are the same ones that keep China strong today and the ones that make Chinese immigrants successful in countries like Malaysia and the USA. On the other hand, New Guinea continues to be impoverished and although I've never heard of any New Guinean immigrants I would not expect them to do very well.

The biologicalists, for whom I cannot think of a less awkward term, are probably the most notorious and require the least explanation. They are most famous for attributing between-group luck differences to genetic factors, but there are certainly more subtle theories. One of the most interesting is [parasite load](#), the idea that areas with greater parasites make people's bodies spend more energy fighting them off, leading to less energy for full neurological development. It's hard to extend this to deal with group differences in a single area (for example between-race differences in the USA) but some people have certainly made valiant attempts. Nevertheless, it's probably fair enough to just think of the biologicalists as "more or less racists".

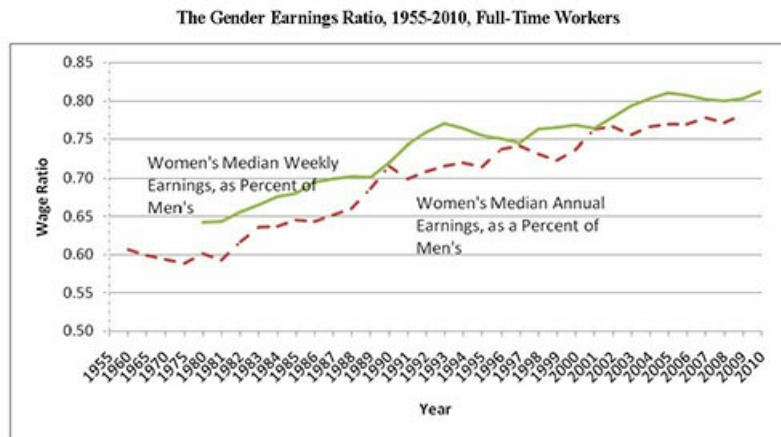
So who is right?

A decent amount of political wrangling over the years seems to involve a conflict between the conservatives — who are some vague mix of the culturalist and biologicalist position — and the liberals, who have embraced the externalist position with gusto.

But the externalist position is deeply flawed. This blog has already cited this graph to make a different point, but now that we have our Reactionary Hat on, let's try it again:



Here's the black-white income gap over time from 1974 to (almost) the present. Over those years, white oppression of black people has decreased drastically. It is not gone. But it has decreased. Yet the income gap stays exactly the same. Compare this to another example of an oppressed group suddenly becoming less oppressed:



Over the same period, the decrease in male oppression of women has resulted in an obvious and continuing rise in women's incomes. This suggests that the externalist hypothesis of women's poor incomes was at least partly correct. But an apparent corollary is that it casts doubt on the externalist hypothesis of racial income gaps.

And, in fact, not all races have a racial income gap, and not all those who do have it in the direction an externalist theory would predict. Jews and Asians faced astounding levels of discrimination when they first came to the United States, but both groups recovered quickly and both now do significantly better than average white Americans. Although the idea of a "Jewish conspiracy" is rightly mocked as anti-Semitic and stupid, it is only bringing the externalist hypothesis — that differences in the success of different races must always be due to oppression — to their natural conclusion.

In fact, Jews and Chinese are interesting in that both groups are widely scattered, both groups often find themselves in very hostile countries, and yet both groups are usually more successful than the native population wherever they go (income and education statistics available upon request). Whether it is Chinese in Malaysia or Jews in France, they seem to do unusually well for themselves despite the constant discrimination. If this is an experiment to distinguish between culturalist and externalist positions, it is a very well replicated one.

This difference in the success of immigrant groups is often closely correlated with the success of the countries they come from. Japan is very rich and advanced, Europe quite rich and advanced, Latin America not so rich or advanced, and Africa least rich and advanced of all. And in fact we find that Japanese-Americans do better than European-Americans do better than Latin-Americans do better than African-Americans. It is pretty amazing that white people manage to modulate their oppression in quite this precise a way, especially when it includes oppressing themselves.

And much of the difference between groups is in areas one would expect to be resistant to oppression. Unlucky groups tend to have higher teenage pregnancy rates, more drug use, and greater intra-group violence, *even when comparing similar economic strata*. That is, if we focus on Chinese-Americans who earn \$60,000/year and African-Americans who earn \$60,000/year, the Chinese will have markedly

better outcomes (I've seen this study done in education, but I expect it would transfer). Sampling from the same economic stratum screens off effects from impoverished starting conditions or living in bad neighborhoods, and it's hard (though of course not impossible) to figure out other ways an oppressive majority could create differential school attendance in these groups.

So luck differences are sometimes in favor of oppressed minorities, do not decrease when a minority becomes less oppressed, correlate closely across societies with widely varying amounts of oppression, and operate in areas where oppression doesn't provide a plausible mechanism. The externalist hypothesis as a collection of natural factors a la Jared Diamond may have merit, but as an oppression-based explanation for modern-day group differences, it fails miserably.

I don't want to dwell on the biological hypothesis too much, because it sort of creeps me out even in a "let me clearly explain a hypothesis I disagree with" way. I will mention that it leaves a lot unexplained, in that many of the "groups" that have such glaring luck differences are not biological groups at all, but rather religious groups such as the Mormons and the Sikhs, both of whom have strikingly different outcomes than the populations they originated from. Even many groups that are biologically different just aren't different *enough* — the English and Irish have strikingly different luck, but attributing that to differences between which *exact* tiny little branch of the Indo-European tree they came from seems like a terrible explanation (although Konkvistador disagrees with me on this one).

Nevertheless, the people who dismiss the biological hypothesis as obviously stupid and totally discredited (by which I mean everyone) are doing it a disservice. For a sympathetic and extraordinarily impressive defense of the biological hypothesis I recommend [this unpublished \(and unpublishable\) review article](#). I will add that I am *extremely* interested in comprehensive takedowns of that article (preferably a full fisting) and that if you have any counterevidence to it at all you should post it in the comments and I will be eternally grateful.

But for now I'm just going to say let's assume by fiat that the biologicalist hypothesis is false, because even with my Reactionary Hat on I find the culturalist hypothesis much more interesting.

The culturalist hypothesis avoids the pitfalls of both the externalist and biological explanations. Unlike the externalists, it can explain why some minority groups are so successful and why group success correlates across societies and immigrant populations. And unlike the biologicalists, it can explain the striking differences between biologically similar groups like the Mormons and the non-Mormon Americans, or the Sikhs and the non-Sikh Indians.

It can also explain some other lingering mysteries, like why a country that's put so much work into keeping black people down would then turn around and elect a black president. Obama was born to an African father and a white mother, raised in Indonesia, and then grew up in Hawaii. At no point did he have much contact with African-American culture, and so a culturalist wouldn't expect his life outcomes to be correlated with those of other African-Americans.

Best of all, despite what the average progressive would tell you the culturalist position isn't really *that* racist. It's a bit like the externalist position in attributing groups' luck to initial conditions, except instead of those initial conditions being how fertile their land is or who's oppressing them, it's what memeplexes they happened to end out with. Change the memeplexes and you can make a New Guinean population achieve Chinese-level outcomes — or vice versa.

The Other Chinese Room Experiment

Assuming we tentatively accept the culturalist hypothesis, what policies does it suggest?

Well, the plan mentioned in the last paragraph of the last section — throw Chinese memes at the people of New Guinea until they achieve Chinese-style outcomes — higher income, less teenage pregnancy, lower crime rates. It doesn't seem like a bad idea. You could try exposing them to Chinese people and the Chinese way of life until some of it stuck. This seems like a good strategy for China, a country whose many problems definitely do not include “a shortage of Chinese people”.

On the other hand, in somewhere more like America, one could be forgiven for immediately rounding this off to some kind of dictatorial brainwashing policy of stealing New Guinean infants away from their homes and locking them in some horrible orphanage run by Chinese people who beat them every time they try to identify with their family or native culture until eventually they absorb Chinese culture through osmosis. This sounds bad.

Luckily, although we don't have quite as many Chinese people as China, we still have a majority culture whose outcomes are *almost* as good as China's and which, as has been mentioned before, permeates every facet of life and every information source like a giant metastasizing thousand-tentacled monster. So in theory, all we need to do is wait for the unstoppable monster to get them.

This strategy, with the octopoid abomination metaphor replaced with a melting pot metaphor for better branding, has been America's strategy for most of the past few centuries — assimilation. It worked for the Irish, who were once viewed with as much racism as any Hispanic or Arab is today. It worked for the Italians, who were once thought of as creepy Papist semi-retarded mafia goons until everyone decided no, they were indistinguishable from everyone else. It worked for the fourth and fifth generation Asians, at least here in suburban California, where they're considered about as “exotic” as the average Irishman. It certainly worked for the Jews, where there are some people of Jewish descent who aren't even *aware* of it until they trace their family history back. And it should be able to work for everyone else. Why isn't it?

The Reactionary's answer to this is the same as the Reactionary's answer to almost everything: because of those darned progressives!

Sometime in the latter half of this century, it became a point of political pride to help minorities resist “cultural imperialism” and the Eurocentric norms that they should feel any pressure to assimilate. Moved by this ideology, the government did everything it could to help minorities avoid assimilation and to shame and thwart anyone trying to get them to assimilate.

There's a story — I've lost the original, but it might have been in Moldbug — about a state noticing that black children were getting lower test scores. It decided, as progressivists do, that the problem was that many of the classes were taught by white teachers, and that probably this meant the black children

couldn't relate to them and were feeling oppressed. So they sent the white teachers off to whiter areas and hiring only black teachers for the black schools, and — sure enough — test scores plummeted further.

California had a sort of similar problem when I was growing up. Most schools were required to teach our large Hispanic immigrant population using bilingual education — that is, teaching them in their native Spanish until they were ready to learn English. The “ready to learn English” tended not to happen, and some people proposed that bilingual education be scrapped. There was a *huge* ruckus where the people in favor of this change were accused of being vile racists who hated Mexicans and wanted to destroy Mexican culture. Thanks to California's colorful proposition system, it passed anyway. And sure enough, as soon as the Hispanics started getting integrated with everyone else and taught in English, test scores went way up.

But this is a rare victory, and we are still very much in “try to prevent assimilation mode”. I went to elementary school just as the “melting pot” metaphor was being phased out in favor of the more politically correct “salad bowl” one — in a melting pot, everyone comes together and becomes alike, but in a salad bowl, everything comes together but stays different, and that's fine.

One externalist argument why minorities sometimes do poorly in school is the fear of “acting white” — that their peers tell them that academic achievement is a form of “acting white” by which they betray their cultural heritage. Unfortunately, we seem to be promoting this on a social level, telling people that assimilating and picking up the best features of majority culture are “acting white”. If the majority culture has useful memes that help protect people against school dropout, crime, and other bad life outcomes, that is a really bad thing to do.

So let's go back to the nightmare scenario with which we started this section — of children being seized from their homes and locked in a room with Chinese people. Is this sort of dystopia the inevitable result of trying to use culturalist theories to equalize group outcomes?

No. There is a proverb beloved of many Reactionaries: “If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.” We could make great strides in solving inequality merely by *ceasing to exert deliberate effort to make things worse*. The progressive campaign to demonize assimilation and make it taboo to even talk about some cultures being better adapted than others prevents the natural solution to inequality which worked for the Irish and the Asians and the Jews from working for the minorities of today. If we would *just stop digging the hole deeper* in order to make ourselves feel superior to our ancestors, we'd have gone a lot of the way — maybe not all of the way, but a lot of it — toward solving the problem.

On Second Thought, Keep Your Tired And Poor To Yourself

Immigration doesn't have to be a problem. In a healthy society, immigrants will be encouraged to assimilate to the majority culture, and after a brief period of disorientation will be just as successful and well-adapted as everyone else.

But in an unhealthy society like ours that makes assimilation impossible, a culturalist will be very worried about immigration.

Let's imagine an idyllic socialist utopia with a population of 100,000. In Utopia, everyone eats healthy organic food, respects the environment and one another, lives in harmony with people of other races, and is completely non-violent. One day, the Prime Minister decides to open up immigration to Americans and discourage them from assimilating.

50,000 Americans come in and move into a part of Utopia that quickly becomes known as Americatown. They bring their guns, their McDonalds, their megachurches, and their racism.

Soon, some Utopians find their family members dying in the crossfire between American street gangs. The megachurches convert a large portion of the Utopians to evangelical Christianity, and it becomes very difficult to get abortions without being harassed and belittled. Black and homosexual Utopians find themselves the target of American hatred, and worse, some young Utopians begin to get affected by American ideas and treat them the same way. American litter fills the previously pristine streets, and Americans find some loopholes in the water quality laws and start dumping industrial waste into the rivers.

By the time society has settled down, we have a society which is maybe partway between Utopia and America. The Americans are probably influenced by Utopian ideas and not quite as bad as their cousins who reminded behind in the States, but the Utopians are no longer as idyllic as their Utopian forefathers, and have inherited some of America's problems.

Would it be *racist* for a Utopian to say "Man, I wish we had never let the Americans in?" Would it be *hateful* to suggest that the borders be closed before even more Americans can enter?

If you are a culturalist, no. Utopian culture is better, at least by Utopian standards, than American culture. Although other cultures can often contribute to enrich your own, there is no law of nature saying that only the good parts of other cultures will transfer over and that no other culture can be worse than yours in any way. The Americans were clearly worse than the Utopians, and it was dumb of the Utopians to let so many Americans in without any safeguards.

Likewise, there are countries that are worse than America. Tribal Afghanistan seems like a pretty good example. Pretty much everything about tribal Afghanistan is horrible. Their culture treats women as

property, enforces sharia law, and contains honor killings as a fact of life. They tend to kill apostate Muslims and non-Muslims a lot. Not all members of Afghan tribes endorse these things, but the average Afghan tribesperson is much more likely to endorse them than the average American. If we import a bunch of Afghan tribesmen, their culture is likely to make America a worse place in the same way that American culture makes Utopia a worse place.

But it's actually much worse than this. We are a democracy. Anyone who moves here and gains citizenship eventually gets the right to vote. People with values different from ours vote for people and laws different from those we would vote for. Progressives have traditionally viewed any opposition to this as anti-immigrant and racist — and, by total coincidence, most other countries, and therefore most immigrants, are progressive.

Imagine a country called Conservia, a sprawling empire of a billion people that has a fifth-dimensional hyperborder with America. The Conservians are all evangelical Christians who hate abortion, hate gays, hate evolution, and believe all government programs should be cut.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Conservians hop the hyperborder fence and enter America, and sympathetic presidents then pass amnesty laws granting them citizenship. As a result, the area you live — or let's use Berkeley, the area I live — gradually becomes more conservative. First the abortion clinics disappear, as Conservian protesters start harassing them out of business and a government that must increasingly pander to Conservians doesn't stop them. Then gay people stop coming out of the closet, as Conservian restaurants and businesses refuse to serve them and angry Conservian writers and journalists create an anti-gay climate. Conservians vote 90% Republican in elections, so between them and the area's native-born conservatives the Republicans easily get a majority and begin defunding public parks, libraries, and schools. Also, Conservians have one pet issue which they promote even more intently than the destruction of secular science — that *all Conservians illegally in the United States must be granted voting rights, and that no one should ever block more Conservians from coming to the US.*

Is this fair to the native Berkeleyans? It doesn't seem that way to me. And what if 10 million Conservians move into America? That's not an outrageous number — there are more Mexican immigrants than that. But it would be enough to have thrown every single Presidential election of the past fifty years to the Republicans — there has never been a Democratic candidate since LBJ who has won the native population by enough of a margin to outweigh the votes of ten million Conservians.

But isn't this incredibly racist and unrealistic? An entire nation of people whose votes skew 90% Republican? No. African-Americans' votes have historically been around 90% Democratic (93% in the last election). Latinos went over 70% Democratic in the last election. For comparison, white people were about 60% Republicans. If there had been no Mexican immigration to the United States over the past few decades, Romney would probably have won the last election.

Is it wrong for a liberal citizen of Berkeley in 2013 to want to close the hyperborder with Conservia so

that California doesn't become part of the Bible Belt and Republicans don't get guaranteed presidencies forever? Would that citizen be racist for even considering this? If not, then pity the poor conservative, who is actually in this exact situation right now.

(a real Reactionary would hasten to add this is more proof that progressives control everything. Because immigration favors progressivism, any opposition to it is racist, but the second we discover the hyperborder with Conservia, the establishment will figure out some reason why *allowing* immigration is racist. Maybe they can call it "inverse colonialism" or something.)

None of this is an argument against immigration. It's an argument against immigration by groups with bad Luck and with noticeably different values than the average American. Let any Japanese person who wants move over. Same with the Russians, and the Jews, and the Indians. Heck, it's not even like it's saying no Afghans — if they swear on a stack of Korans that they're going to try to learn English and not do any honor killings, they could qualify as well.

The United States used to have a policy sort of like this. It was called the [Immigration Act of 1924](#). Its actual specifics were dumb, because it banned for example Asians and Jews, but the principle behind it — groups with good outcomes and who are a good match for our values can immigrate as much as they want, everyone else has a slightly harder time — seems broadly wise. So of course progressives attacked it as racist and Worse Than Hitler and it got repealed in favor of the current policy: *everyone* has a really hard time immigrating but if anyone sneaks over the border under cover of darkness we grant them citizenship anyway because not doing that would be mean.

Once again, coming up with a fair and rational immigration policy wouldn't require some incredibly interventionist act of state control. It would just require that we notice the hole we've been deliberately sticking ourselves in and *stop digging*.

Imperialism Strikes Back

In an externalist/progressive worldview, the best way to help disadvantaged minorities is to eliminate the influence of more privileged majority groups. In a culturalist/Reactionary worldview, the best way to help disadvantaged minorities is to try to maximize the influence of more privileged majority groups. This suggests re-examining colonialism. But first, a thought experiment.

Suppose you are going to be reincarnated as a black person (if you are already black, as a different black person). You may choose which country you will be born in; the rest is up to Fate. What country do you choose?

The top of my list would be Britain, with similar countries like Canada and America close behind. But what if you could only choose among majority-black African countries?

Several come to my mind as comparatively liveable. Kenya. Tanzania. Botswana. South Africa. Namibia (is your list similar?) And one thing these places all have in common was being heavily, *heavily* colonized by the British.

We compare the sole African country that was never colonized, Ethiopia. Ethiopia has become a byword for senseless suffering thanks to its coups, wars, genocides, and especially famines. This seems like counter-evidence to the “colonialism is the root of all evil” hypothesis.

Yes, colonization had some horrible episodes. Anyone who tries to say King Leopold II was anything less than one of the worst people who ever lived has zero right to be taken seriously. On the other hand, eventually the Belgian people got outraged enough to take it away from Leopold, after which there follows a fifty year period that was the only time in history when the Congo was actually a kind of nice place. Mencius Moldbug likes to link to a [Time magazine article from the 1950s](#) praising the peace and prosperity of the Congo as a model colony. Then in 1960 it became independent, and I don't know what happens next because the series of civil wars and genocides and corrupt warlords after that are so horrible that I can't even read all the way through the articles about them. Seriously, not necessarily in numbers but in sheer graphic brutality it is worse than the Holocaust, the Inquisition, and Mao combined and you *do not want to know* what makes me say this.

So yes, Leopold II is one of history's great villains, but once he was taken off the scene colonial Congo improved markedly. And any attempt to attribute the nightmare that is the modern Congo to colonialism has to cope with the historical fact that the post-Leopold colonial Congo was actually pretty nice until it was decolonized at which point it immediately went to hell.

So the theory that colonialism is the source of all problems has to contend with the observation that heavily colonized countries are the most liveable, the sole never-colonized country is among the least liveable, and countries' liveability plummeted drastically as soon as colonialism stopped.

But let's stop picking on Africans. Suppose you are going to be reincarnated as a person of Middle Eastern descent (I would have said "Arab", but then we would get into the whole 'most Middle Easterners are not Arabs' debate). Once again, you can choose your country. Where do you go?

Once again, Britain, US, or somewhere of that ilk sound like your best choices.

Okay, once again we're ruling that out. You've got to go somewhere in the Middle East.

Your best choice is one of those tiny emirates where everyone is a relative of the emir and gets lots of oil money and is super-rich: I would go with Qatar. Let's rule them out too.

Your next-best choice is Israel.

Yes, Israel. Note that I am *not* saying the Occupied Palestinian Territories; that would be just as bad a choice as you expect. I'm saying Israel, where 20% of the population is Arab, and about 16% Muslim.

Israeli Arabs earn on average about \$6750 per year. Compare this to conditions in Israel's Arab neighbors. In Egypt, average earnings are \$6200; in Jordan, \$5900; in Syria, only \$5000.

Aside from the economics, there are other advantages. If you happen to be Muslim, you will have a *heck* of a lot easier time practicing your religion freely in Israel than in some Middle Eastern country where you follow the wrong sect of Islam. You'll be allowed to vote for your government, something you can't do in monarchical Jordan or war-torn Syria, and which Egypt is currently having, er, severe issues around. You can even criticize the government as much as you want (empirically quite a lot), a right Syrian and Egyptian Arabs are currently dying for. Finally, you get the benefit of living in a clean, safe, developed country with good health care and free education for all.

I'm not saying that Israeli Arabs aren't discriminated against or have it as good as Israeli Jews. I'm just saying they have it better than Arabs in most other countries. Once again, we find that colonialism, supposed to be the root of all evil, is actually preferable to non-colonialism in most easily measurable ways.

It may be the case that pre-colonial societies were better than either colonial or post-colonial societies. I actually suspect this is true, in a weird [Comanche Indians are better than all of us](#) sort of sense. But "pre-colonial" isn't a choice nowadays. Nowadays it's "how much influence do we want the better parts of the West to have over countries that have already enthusiastically absorbed the worst parts of the West?" Whatever I may feel about the Safavid Dynasty, I would at least rather be born in Afghanistan-post-American-takeover than Afghanistan-pre-American-takeover.

So does this mean some sort of nightmarish "invade every country in the world, kill their leadership, and replace them with Americans, for their own good" type scenario?

Once again, no. Look at China. They've been quietly colonizing Africa for a decade now, [and the continent](#)

[has never been doing better](#). And by “colonizing”, I mean “investing in”, with probably some sketchy currying of influence and lobbying and property-gathering going on on the side. It’s been great for China, it’s been a hugely successful injection of money and technology into Africa, and they probably couldn’t have come up with a better humanitarian intervention if they had been trying.

Why hasn’t the West done it? Because every time an idea like that has been mooted, the progressives have shot it down with “You neo-colonialist! You’re worse than King Leopold II, who was himself worse than Hitler! By the transitive property, you are *worse than Hitler!*”

No one needs to go about invading anyone else or killing their government. But if you find yourself in a hole, *stop digging*.

The Uncanny Valley Of Dictatorship

I kind of skimmed over the Palestinian Territories in the last section. They are, indeed, a terrible dehumanizing place and the treatment of their citizens is an atrocity that blemishes a world which allows it to continue. Is this a strike against colonialism?

Any 19th century European aristocrat looking at the Palestinian Territories would note that Israel is being a *terrible colonizer*, not in a moral sense but in a purely observational sense. It's not getting any money or resources out of its colony at all! It's letting people totally just protest it and get away with it! They've even handed most of it over to a government of natives! Queen Victoria would *not* be amused.

Suppose a psychopath became Prime Minister of Israel (yes, obvious joke is obvious). He declares: "Today we are annexing the Palestinian territories. All Palestinians become Israeli residents with most of the rights of citizens except they can't vote. If anyone speaks out against Israel, we'll shoot them. If anyone commits a crime, we'll shoot them." What would happen?

Well, first, a lot of people would get shot. After that? The Palestinians would be in about the same position as Israeli Arabs are today, except without the right to vote, plus they get shot if they protest. This is vastly better than the position they're in now, and better than the position of say the people of Syria who are poorer, *also* lack the right to vote, and *also* empirically get shot if they protest.

No more worries about roadblocks. No more worries about passports. No more worries about sanctions. No more worries about economic depression. The only worry is getting shot, and you can avoid that by never speaking out against Israel. Optimal? Probably not. A heck of a lot better than what the Palestinians have today? Seems possible.

It seems like there's an uncanny valley of dictatorship. Having no dictator at all, the way it is here in America, is very good. Having a really really dictatorial dictator who controls everything, like the czar or this hypothetical Israeli psychopath, kinda sucks but it's peaceful and you know exactly where you stand. Being somewhere in the middle, where it's dictatorial enough to hurt, but not dictatorial enough for the dictator to feel secure enough to mostly leave you alone except when he wants something, is worse than either extreme.

Mencius Moldbug uses the fable of Fnargl, an omnipotent and invulnerable alien who becomes dictator of Earth. Fnargl is an old-fashioned greedy colonizer: he just wants to exploit Earth for as much gold as possible. He considers turning humans into slaves to work in gold mines, except some would have to be a special class of geologist slaves to plan the gold mines, and there would have to be other slaves to grow food to support the first two classes of slaves, and other slaves to be managers to coordinate all these other slaves, and so on. Eventually he realizes this is kind of dumb and there's already a perfectly good economy. So he levies a 20% tax on every transaction (higher might hurt the economy) and uses the

money to buy gold. Aside from this he just hangs out.

Fnargl has no reason to ban free speech: let people plot against him. He's omnipotent and invulnerable; it's not going to work. Banning free speech would just force him to spend money on jackbooted thugs which he could otherwise be spending on precious, precious gold. He has no reason to torture dissidents. What are they going to do if left unmolested? *Overthrow*him?

Moldbug claims that Fnargl's government would not only be better than that of a less powerful human dictator like Mao, but that it would be *literally better than the government we have today*. Many real countries *do* restrict free speech or torture dissidents. And if you're a libertarian, Fnargl's "if it doesn't disrupt gold production, I'm okay with it" line is a dream come true.

So if the Israelis want to improve the Palestinian Territories' plight, they can do one of two things. First, they can grant it full independence. Second, they do exactly the opposite: can take away all of its independence and go full Fnargl.

We already know Israel doesn't want to just grant full independence, which leaves "problem continues forever" or "crazy psychopath alien solution". Could the latter really work?

Well, no. Why not? Because the Palestinians would probably freak out and start protesting *en masse* and the Israelis would have to shoot all of them and that would be horrible.

But it's worth noting this is not just a natural state of the world. The British successfully colonized Palestine for several decades. They certainly tried the Fnargl approach: "No way you're getting independence, so just sit here and deal with it or we shoot you." It worked pretty well then. I would hazard a guess to say the average Palestinian did much better under British rule than they're doing now. So why wouldn't it work again?

In a word, progressivism. For fifty years, progressives have been telling the colonized people of the world "If anyone colonizes you, this is the worst thing in the world, and if you have any pride in yourself you must start a rebellion, even a futile rebellion, immediately." This was non-obvious to people a hundred years ago, which is why people rarely did it. It was only after progressivism basically told colonized peoples "You're not revolting yet? What are you, *chicken*?" that the modern difficulties in colonialism took hold. And it's only after progressivism gained clout in the countries that rule foreign policy that it became politically impossible for a less progressive country to try colonialism.

If not for progressivism, Israel would have been able to peacefully annex the Palestinian territories as a colony with no more of a humanitarian crisis than Britain annexing New Zealand or somewhere. Everything would have been solved and everyone could have gone home in time for tea.

Once again, the problem with these holes is that we *keep digging them*. Maybe if we'd stop, there wouldn't be so many holes anymore.

Humane, All Too Humane

There seem to be similar uncanny valley effects in the criminal justice system and in war.

Modern countries pride themselves on their humane treatment of prisoners. And by “humane”, I mean “lock them up in a horrible and psychologically traumatizing concrete jail for ten years of being beaten and raped and degraded, sometimes barely even seeing the sun or a green plant for that entire time, then put it on their permanent record so they can never get a good job or interact with normal people ever again when they come out.”

Compare this to what “inhumane” countries that were still into “cruel and unusual punishment” would do for the same crime. A couple of lashes with the whip, then you’re on your way.

Reader. You have just been convicted of grand theft auto (the crime, not the game). You’re innocent, but the prosecutor was very good at her job and you’ve used up all your appeals and you’re just going to have to accept the punishment. The judge gives you two options:

1. Five years in prison
2. Fifty strokes of the lash

Like everyone else except a few very interesting people who help provide erotic fantasies for the rest of us, I don’t like being whipped. But I would choose (2) in *a fraction of a heartbeat*.

And aside from being better for me, it would be better for society as well. We know that people who spend time in prison are both more likely to stay criminals in the future and [better at being criminals](#). And each year in jail costs the State \$50,000; more than it would cost to give a kid a year’s free tuition at Harvard. Cutting the prison system in half would free up approximately enough money to give free college tuition to all students at the best school they can get into.

But of course we don’t do that. We stick with the prisons and the rape and the kids who go work at McDonalds because they can’t afford college. Why? *Progressives!*

If we were to try to replace prison with some kind of corporal punishment, progressives would freak out and say we were cruel and inhumane. Since the prison population is disproportionately minority, they would probably get to use their favorite word-beginning-with-“R”, and allusions would be made to plantation owners who used to whip slaves. In fact, progressives would come up with some reason to oppose even giving criminals the *option* of corporal punishment (an option most would certainly take) and any politician insufficiently progressive to even recommend it would no doubt be in for some public flagellation himself, albeit of a less literal kind.

So once again, we have an uncanny valley. Being very nice to prisoners is humane and effective (Norway

[seems to be trying this with some success](#)), but we're not going to do it because we're dumb and it's probably too expensive anyway. Being very strict to prisoners is humane and effective — the corporal punishment option. But being somewhere in the fuzzy middle is cruel to the prisoners and incredibly destructive to society — and it's the only route the progressives will allow us to take.

Some Reactionaries have tried to apply the same argument to warfare. Suppose that during the Vietnam War, we had nuked Hanoi. What would have happened?

Okay, fine. The Russians would have nuked us and everyone in the world would have died. Bad example. But suppose the Russians were out of the way. Wouldn't nuking Hanoi be a massive atrocity?

Yes. But compare it to the alternative. Nuking Hiroshima killed about 150,000 people. The Vietnam War killed about 3 million. The latter also had a much greater range of non-death effects, from people being raped and tortured and starved to tens of thousands ending up with post-traumatic stress disorder and countless lives being disrupted. If nuking Hanoi would have been an alternative to the Vietnam War, it would have been a *really really good* alternative.

Most of the countries America invades know they can't defeat the US military long-term. Their victory condition is helping US progressives bill the war as an atrocity and get the troops sent home. So the enemy's incentive is to make the war drag on as long as possible and contain as many atrocities as possible. It's not too hard to make the war drag on, because they can always just hide among civilians and be relatively confident the US is too humane to risk smoking them out. And it's never too hard to commit atrocities. So they happily follow their incentives, and the progressives in the US happily hold up their side of the deal by agitating for the troops to be sent home, which they eventually are.

Compare this to the style of warfare in colonial days. "This is our country now, we're not leaving, we don't really care about atrocities, and we don't really care how many civilians we end up killing." It sounds incredibly ugly, but of colonial Britain or very-insistently-non-colonial USA, guess which one ended up pacifying Iraq after three months with only about 6,000 casualties, and guess which one took five years to re-establish a semblance of order and killed about 100,000 people in the process?

Once again we see an uncanny valley effect. Leaving Iraq alone completely would have been a reasonable humanitarian choice. Using utterly overwhelming force to pacify Iraq by any means necessary would have briefly been very ugly, but our enemies would have folded quickly and with a few assumptions this could also have been a reasonable humanitarian choice. But a wishy-washy half-hearted attempt to pacify Iraq that left the country in a state of low-grade poorly-defined war for nearly a decade was neither reasonable nor humanitarian.

Once again, the solution isn't some drastic nightmare scenario where all prisoners are tortured and all wars are fought with sarin nerve gas. It's that if prisoners *prefer* corporal punishment, progressives don't call "racism!" or "atrocity!" so loudly that it becomes politically impossible to give them what they want.

Once again, all we have to do is *stop digging*.

Gender! And Now That I Have Your Attention, Let's Talk About Sex

So the two things Reactionaries like to complain about all the time are race and sex, and since we have *more* than gone overboard with our lengthy diversion into race, we might as well take a quick look at sex.

As far as I know, even the Reactionaries who are really into biological differences between races don't claim that women are intellectually inferior to men. I don't even think they necessarily believe there are biological differences between the two groups. And yet they are not really huge fans of feminism. Why?

Let's start with some studies comparing gender roles and different outcomes.

[Surveys of women show](#) that they were on average happier fifty years ago than they are today. In fact, in the 1950s, women generally self-reported higher happiness than men; today, men report significantly higher happiness than women. So the history of the past fifty years — a history of more and more progressive attitudes toward gender — have been a history of women gradually becoming worse and worse off relative to their husbands and male friends.

This doesn't *necessarily* condemn progressivism, but as the ancient proverb goes, it sure waggles its eyebrows suggestively and gestures furtively while mouthing 'look over there'.

To confirm, we would want to look within a single moment in time: that is, are feminist women with progressive gender roles *today* less happy than their traditionalist peers? The answer [appears to be yes](#).

Amusingly, because we *do* still live in a society where these things couldn't be published unless someone took a progressivist tack, the New York Times article quoted above ends by saying the *real* problem is that men are jerks who don't do their share of the housework.

But when we actually study this, we find that [progressive marriages in which men and women split housework equally are 50% more likely to end in divorce](#) than traditional marriages where the women mostly take care of it. The same is true of working outside the home: progressive marriages where both partners work [are more likely to end in divorce](#) than traditional marriages where the man works and the woman stays home.

Maybe this is just because the same people who are progressive enough to defy traditional gender roles are also the same people who are progressive enough not to think divorce is a sin? But this seems unlikely: in general religious people get divorced *more* than the irreligious. And since I did promise we'd be talking about sex, consider the studies showing people in traditional marriages have [better sex lives](#) than their feminist and progressive friends. This doesn't seem like something that could easily be explained merely by religion, unless religion has gotten *way* cooler since the last time I attended synagogue.

So why is this? I have heard some reactionaries say that although there are not intellectual differences between men and women, there are emotional differences, and that women are (either for biological or cultural reasons) more “submissive” to men’s “dominant” — and a quick search of the BDSM community seems to both to validate the general rule and to showcase some very striking exceptions.

But my money would be on a simpler hypothesis. Every marriage involves conflict. The traditional concept of gender contains two roles that are divided in a time-tested way to minimize conflict as much as possible. In a perfect-spherical-cow sense, either the husband or the wife could step into either role, and it would still work just as well. But since men have been socialized for one role since childhood, and women socialized for the other role, it seems that in most cases the easiest solution is to stick them in the one they’ve been trained for.

We could also go with a third hypothesis: that *women aren’t actually bizarre aliens from the planet Zygra’ax with completely inexplicable preferences*. I mean, suppose you had the following two options:

1. A job working from home, where you are your own boss. The job description is “spending as much or as little time as you want with your own children and helping them grow and adjust to the adult world.” (but Sister Y also has a post on [the childless alternative](#) to this)
2. A job in the office, where you do have a boss, and she wants you to get her the Atkins report “by yesterday” or she is going to throw your sorry ass out on the street where it belongs, and there *better* not be any complaints about it this time.

Assume both jobs would give you exactly the same amount of social status and respect.

Now assume that suddenly a bunch of people come along saying that *actually*, only losers pick Job 1 and surely you’re not a *loser*, are you? And you have to watch all your former Job 1 buddies go out and take Job 2 and be praised for this and your husband asks why *you* aren’t going into Job 2 and contributing something to the family finances for once, and eventually you just give in and go to Job 2, but also you’ve got to do large portions of Job 1, and also the extra income mysteriously fails to give your family any more money and [in fact you are worse off financially than before](#).

Is it so hard to imagine that a lot of women would be less happy under this new scenario?

Now of course (most) feminists very reasonably say that it’s Totally Okay If You Want To Stay Home And We’re Not Trying To Force Anyone. But let’s use the feminists’ own criteria on that one. Suppose Disney put out a series of movies in which they had lots of great female role models who only worked in the home and were subservient to their husbands all the time, and lauded them as *real* women who were courageous and awesome and sexy and not just poor oppressed stick-in-the-muds, and then at the end they flashed a brief message “But Of Course Working Outside The Home Is Totally Okay Also”. Do you think feminists would respond “Yeah, we have no problem with this, after all they *did* flash that message at the end”?

Aside from being better for women, traditional marriages seem to have many other benefits. They allow someone to bring up the children so that they don't have to spend their childhood in front of the television being socialized by reruns of *Drug-Using Hypersexual Gangsters With Machine Guns*. They ensure that at least one member of each couple has time to be doing things that every household should be doing anyway, like keeping careful track of finances, attending parent-teacher conferences, and keeping in touch with family.

So do men need to force women to stay barefoot and in the kitchen all the time, and chase Marie Curie out of physics class so she can go home and bake for her husband?

By this point you may be noticing a trend. No, we don't need to do that. If we stopped optimizing the media to send feminist messages as loud as possible, if we stopped actively opposing any even slightly positive portrayal of a housewife as "sexist" and "behind the times", and if we stopped having entire huge lobby groups supported vehemently by millions of people *dedicated entirely to making the problem worse*, then maybe things would take care of themselves.

There's some sort of metaphor here...something about dirt...or a shovel...nah, never mind.

Plays Well In Groups

Suppose you were kidnapped by terrorists, and you needed someone to organize a rescue. Would you prefer the task be delegated to the Unitarians, or the Mormons?

This question isn't about whether you think an *individual* Unitarian or Mormon would make a better person to rush in Rambo-style and get you out of there. It's about whether you would prefer the Unitarian Church or the Mormon Church to coordinate your rescue.

I would go with the Mormons. The Mormons seem *effective* in all sorts of ways. They're effective evangelists. They're effective fundraisers. They're effective at keeping the average believer following their commandments. They would figure out a plan, implement it, and come in guns-blazing.

The Unitarians would be a disaster. First someone would interrupt the discussion to ask whether it's fair to use the word "terrorists", or whether we should use the less judgmental "militant". Several people would note that until investigating the situation more clearly, they can't even be sure the terrorists aren't in the right in this case. In fact, what is "right" anyway? An attempt to shut down this discussion to focus more on the object-level problem would be met with cries of "censorship!".

If anyone did come up with a plan, a hundred different pedants would try to display their intelligence by nitpicking meaningless details. Eventually some people would say that it's an outrage that no one's even *considering* whether the bullets being used are recyclable, and decide to split off and mount their *own*, ecologically-friendly rescue attempt. In the end, four different schismatic rescue attempts would run into each other, mistake each other for the enemy, and annihilate themselves while the actual terrorists never even hear about it.

(if it were Reform Jews, the story would be broadly similar, but with *twenty* different rescue attempts, and I say this fondly, as someone who attended a liberal synagogue for ten years)

One relevant difference between Mormons and Unitarians seems to be a cultural one. It's not quite that the Mormons value conformity and the Unitarians value individuality — that's not exactly *wrong*, but it's letting progressives bend language to their will, the same way as calling the two sides of the abortion debate "pro-freedom" and "anti-woman" or whatever they do nowadays. It's more like a Mormon norm that the proper goal of a discussion is agreement, and a Unitarian norm that the proper goal of a discussion is disagreement.

There's a saying I've heard in a lot of groups, which is something along the lines of "diversity is what unites us". This is nice and memorable, but there are other groups where *unity* is what unites them, and they seem to be more, well, united.

Unity doesn't just arise by a sudden and peculiar blessing of the angel Moroni. It's the sort of thing you

can create. Holidays and festivals and weird rituals create unity. If everyone jumps up and down three times on the summer solstice, then yes, objectively this is dumb, but you feel a little more bonded with the other people who do it: *I'm* one of the solstice-jumpers, and *you're* one of the solstice-jumpers, and that makes us solstice-jumpers together.

[Robert Putnam famously found](#) that the greater the diversity in a community:

...the less people vote, the less they volunteer, and the less they give to charity and work on community projects. In the most diverse communities, neighbors trust one another about half as much as they do in the most homogenous settings. The study, the largest ever on civic engagement in America, found that virtually all measures of civic health are lower in more diverse settings. “The extent of the effect is shocking,” says Scott Paige, a University of Michigan political scientist.

I don't think this effect is particularly related to race. I bet that if you throw together a community of white, black, Asian, Hispanic, and Martian Mormons, they act as a “non-diverse” community. As we saw before, culture trumps race.

So this sort of cultural unity is exactly the sort of thing we need to improve civic life and prevent racism... and of course, it's exactly what progressives get enraged if we try to produce.

In America, progressivism focuses on pointing out how terrible American culture is and how much other people's cultures are better than ours. If we celebrate Columbus Day, we have to spend the whole time hearing about what a jerk Columbus was (disclaimer: to be fair, Columbus was a *huge* jerk). If we celebrate Washington's birthday, we have to spend the whole time hearing about how awful it was that Washington owned slaves. Goodness help us if someone tries to celebrate Christmas — there are now areas where if a city puts up Christmas decorations, it has to give equal space to atheist groups [to put up displays about how Christmas is stupid and people who celebrate it suck](#). That's...probably not the way to maximize cultural unity, exactly?

We are a culture engaged in the continuing project of subverting itself. Our heroes have been toppled, our rituals mocked, and one gains status by figuring out new and better ways to show how the things that should unite us are actually stupid and oppressive. Even the conservatives who wear American flag lapel pins and stuff spend most of their time talking about how they hate America today and the American government and everything else associated with America except for those stupid flag pins of theirs.

Compare this to olden cultures. If someone in Victorian Britain says “God save the Queen!”, then everyone else repeated “God save the Queen!”, and more important, *they mean it*. “England expects every man to do their duty” is actually perceived as a *compelling reason* why one's duty should be done.

It would seem that the Victorian British are more on the Mormon side and modern Americans more like the Unitarians. And in fact, the Victorians managed to colonize half the planet while America can't even get the Afghans to stop shooting each other. While one may not agree with Victorian Britain's aims, one

has to wonder what would happen if that kind of will, energy, and unity of purpose were directed towards a worthier goal (I wonder this about the Mormon Church too).

Reactionaries would go further and explore this idea in a depth I don't have time for, besides to say that they believe many historical cultures were carefully optimized and time-tested for unifying potential, and that they really sunk deep into the bones of the populace until failing to identify with them would have been unthinkable. The three cultures they most often cite as virtuous examples here are Imperial China, medieval Catholicism, and Victorian Britain; although it would be foolish to try to re-establish one of those exactly in a population not thoroughly steeped in them, we could at least try to make our own culture a little more like they were.

Once again, the Reactionary claim is not necessarily that we have to brainwash people or drag the Jews kicking and screaming to Christmas parties. It's just that maybe we should stop deliberately optimizing society for as little unity and shared culture as humanly possible.

Reach For The Tsars

I have noticed a tendency of mine to reply to arguments with “Well yeah, that would work for the X Czar, but there’s no such thing.”

For example, take the problems with the scientific community, which my friends in Berkeley often discuss. There’s lots of publication bias, statistics are done in a confusing and misleading way out of sheer inertia, and replications often happen very late or not at all. And sometimes someone will say something like “I can’t believe people are too dumb to fix Science. All we would have to do is require early registration of studies to avoid publication bias, turn this new and powerful statistical technique into the new standard, and accord higher status to scientists who do replication experiments. It would be really simple and it would vastly increase scientific progress. I must just be smarter than all existing scientists, since I’m able to think of this and they aren’t.”

And I answer “Well, yeah, that would work for the Science Czar. He could just make a Science Decree that everyone has to use the right statistics, and make another Science Decree that everyone must accord replications higher status. And since we all follow the Science Czar’s Science Decrees, it would all work perfectly!”

Why exactly am I being so sarcastic? Because things that work from a czar’s-eye view don’t work from within the system. No *individual* scientist has an incentive to unilaterally switch to the new statistical technique for her *own* research, since it would make her research less likely to produce earth-shattering results and since it would just confuse all the other scientists. They just have an incentive to want *everybody else* to do it, at which point they would follow along.

Likewise, no journal has the incentive to unilaterally demand early registration, since that just means everyone who forgot to early register their studies would switch to their competitors’ journals.

And since the system is *only* made of individual scientists and individual journals, no one is ever going to switch and science will stay exactly as it is.

I use this “czar” terminology a lot. Like when people talk about reforming the education system, I point out that right now students’ incentive is to go to the most prestigious college they can get into so employers will hire them, employers’ incentive is to get students from the most prestigious college they can so that they can defend their decision to their boss if it goes wrong, and colleges’ incentive is to do whatever it takes to get more prestige, as measured in *US News and World Report* rankings. Does this lead to huge waste and poor education? Yes. Could an Education Czar notice this and make some Education Decrees that lead to a vastly more efficient system? Easily! But since there’s no Education Czar everybody is just going to follow their own incentives, which have nothing to do with education or efficiency.

There is an extraordinarily useful [pattern of refactored agency](#) in which you view humans as basically actors playing roles determined by their incentives. Anyone who strays even slightly from their role is outcompeted and replaced by an understudy who will do better. That means the final state of a system is determined entirely by its initial state and the dance of incentives inside of it.

If a system has perverse incentives, it's not going to magically fix itself; no one inside the system has an incentive to do that. The end user of the system — the student or consumer — is already part of the incentive flow, so they're not going to be helpful. The only hope is that the system can get a Czar — an Unincentivized Incentivizer, someone who controls the entire system while standing outside of it.

I alluded to this a lot in my (warning: political piece even longer than this one) [Non-Libertarian FAQ](#). I argued that because systems can't always self-improve from the inside, every so often you need a government to coordinate things.

Reactionaries would go further and say that a standard liberal democratic government is not an Unincentivized Incentivizer. Government officials are beholden to the electorate and to their campaign donors, and they need to worry about being outcompeted by the other party. They, too, are slaves to their incentives. The obvious solution to corporate welfare is “end corporate welfare”. A three year old could think of it. But anyone who tried would get outcompeted by powerful corporate interests backing the campaigns of their opponents, or outcompeted by other states that still have corporate welfare and use it to send businesses and jobs their way. It's obvious from outside the system, and completely impossible from the inside. It would appear we need some kind of a Government Czar.

You know who had a Government Czar? Imperial Russia. For short, they just called him “Czar”.

Everyone realizes our current model of government is screwed up and corrupt. We keep electing fresh new Washington Outsiders who promise with bright eyes to unupscrew and decorruptify it. And then they keep being exactly as screwed up and corrupt as the last group, because if you hire a new actor to play the same role, the lines are still going to come out exactly the same. Want reform? The lines to “Act V: An Attempt To Reform The System” are already written and have been delivered dozens of times already. How is changing the actors and actresses going to help?

A Czar could actually get stuff done. Imperial Decree 1: End all corporate welfare. Imperial Decree 2: Close all tax loopholes. Imperial Decree 3: Health care system that doesn't suck. You get the idea.

Would the Czar be corrupt and greedy and tyrannical? Yes, probably. Let's say he decided to use our tax money to build himself a mansion ten times bigger than the Palace of Versailles. The Internet suggests that building Versailles today would cost somewhere between \$200M and \$1B, so let's dectuple the high range of that estimate and say the Czar built himself a \$10 billion dollar palace. And he wants it plated in solid gold, so that's another \$10 billion. Fine. Corporate welfare is \$200B per year. If the Czar were to tell us “I am going to take your tax money and spend it on a giant palace ten times the size of Versailles

covered in solid gold”, the proper response would be “Great, but what are we going to do with the other \$180 billion dollars you’re saving us?”

(here I am being facetious. A better answer might be to point out that the British royal family already lives in a giant palace, and they by all accounts [earn the country more than they cost](#))

As for the tyranny, we have Fnargl’s shining example to inspire us. But really. Suppose Obama were named Czar. Do we really think he’d start sending Republicans to penal camps in Alaska for disagreeing with him? If Sasha took over as Czarina, do you think *she’d* do that?



Is this the face of someone who would crush you with an iron fist?

In the democratic system, the incentive is always for the country to become more progressive, because progressivism is the appeal to the lowest common denominator. There may be reversals, false starts, and Reagan Revolutions, but over the course of centuries democracy means inevitable creeping progress. As Mencius Moldbug says, “Cthulhu swims slowly, but he always swims left.” A Czar, free from these incentives, would be able to take the best of progressivism and leave the rest behind.

(the Reactionaries I beta-tested this essay with say that the last paragraph deserves much more space, that there are many complicated theories of why this holds true, and that it is a central feature of Reactionary thought. I don’t understand this well enough to write about it yet, but you may want to read Moldbug on...no, on second thought, just let it pass.)

So who gets to be Czar? Probably the most important factor is a Schelling point: it should be someone everyone agrees has the unquestioned right to rule. Obama is not a *bad* choice, but one worries he may be a little too progressive to treat the job with the seriousness it deserves. We could import the British monarchy, but really ever since the Glorious Revolution they’ve been a bit too constitutional for our purposes. If we wanted a genuine, legitimate British monarch of the old royal line, someone with authority flowing through his very veins, our best choice is, indeed to exhume the body of [King James II](#) (ruled 1685 — 1688), clone him, and place the clone on the throne of the new United States Of The Western World.

Really, it's just common sense.

A Brief Survey Of Not Directly Political Reactionary Philosophy

We have reached the goal we set for ourselves. Is this a comprehensive understanding of Reactionary thought?

No. This focuses on political philosophy, but Reaction is a complete philosophical movement with many other branches.

For example, Reactionary moral theories tend to focus on the dichotomy between Virtue and Decadence. Extensional definitions might do best here: consider the difference in outlook between Seneca the Stoic and the Roman Emperor Nero, or between Liu Bei and Cao Cao, or between Thomas More and Henry VIII. In each of these cases, a virtuous figure recognized the decadence of his society and willfully refused to succumb to it. Of course, an even more virtuous example would be someone like Lycurgus, who realized the decadence of his society and so *went out and fixed society*.

Reactionary aesthetic theories tend to be, well, reactions against progressive aesthetic theories. To Reactionaries, the epitome of the progressive aesthetic theory against which they rebel is the fairy tale of the Ugly Duckling, where one duckling is uglier than the rest, everyone mocks him, but then he turns out to be the most beautiful of all. The moral of the story is that ugly things are really the most beautiful, beautiful things are for bullies who just want to oppress the less beautiful things, and if you don't realize this, you're dumb and have no taste.

Therefore, decent, *sophisticated* people must scoff at anything outwardly beautiful and say that it's probably oppressive in some way, while gushing over anything apparently ugly. Cathedrals are "gaudy" or "tacky", but Brutalist concrete blocks are "revolutionary" and "groundbreaking". An especially conventionally attractive woman is probably just "self-objectifying" and "pandering", but someone with ten tattoos and a shaved head is "truly confident in her femininity". Art of the sort [people have been proven to like most](#) is old-fashioned and conformist; *real* art is urinals that artistically convey an anti-art message, or paintings so baffling that [no one can tell if they are accidentally hung upside-down](#).

The Reactionary aesthetic, then, is something so simple that if it weren't specifically a reaction to something that already exists, it would sound stupid: no, beautiful things are legitimately beautiful, ugly things are legitimately ugly, any attempt to disguise this raises suspicions of ulterior motives.

Reactionaries also seem to be really into metaphysics, especially of the scholastic variety, but I have yet to be able to understand this. Blatant racism, attempts to clone long-dead monarchs, and giving a gold-obsessed alien absolute power all seem like they could sort of make sense in the right light, but why anyone would want more metaphysics is honestly completely beyond me.

But Seriously, What Do We Do About This Hole? And How Fast Should We Be Digging, Anyway?

We started with an argument that modern culture probably doesn't give us a very impartial view on the relative merits of modern culture, and so we should investigate this more thoroughly.

We noted that on many of the criteria we care about, the present is better only because of its improved technology. We further noted that on other criteria, even *despite* our better technology, past societies seemed to outperform us

Nevertheless, we identified some areas where the present really did seem better than the past. The present was less racist, less sexist, less colonialist, more humane, and less jingoistic.

We then went through each of those things and showed why they might not be as purely beneficial as generally believed. We found evidence that societies many would call "racist" give minorities better measurable outcomes; that societies many would call "sexist" give women higher self-reported life satisfaction; that colonialism led to peace and economic growth that decolonialism was unable to match; and that supposedly more "humane" policies end up torturing their victims far more than just getting something superficially cruel over with would; and even that cultural unity, which some might call "jingoism", has been empirically shown to be an important factor in building communities and inspiring prosocial sentiment.

Therefore, we found that all the points we had previously noted as advantages of present over past societies were, when examined more closely, in fact points in the past societies' favor.

Next, we looked at how we might replicate these advantages of past societies in a world which seems to be moving inexorably further toward so-called progressive ideals. We independently came up with the same solution that these past societies used: the idea of a monarch, either constitutional or (preferably) absolutist. We found that many of the problems we would expect such a monarch to produce are exaggerated or unlikely.

Finally, we identified this ideal monarch as a clone of James II of the United Kingdom.

We also went into a survey of a couple of other Reactionary ideas. Other such ideas I have *not* included simply because I was totally unable to understand or sympathize with them and so couldn't give them fair treatment include: an obsession with chastity, highly positive feelings about Catholicism that never go as far as actually going to church or believing any Catholic doctrine in a non-ironic way, neo-formalism, and what the heck the Whigs have to do with anything.

Nevertheless, I hope that this has been a not-entirely futile exercise in trying to [Ideological Turing Test](#) an opposing belief. I think Reactionaries are correct that some liberal ideas have managed to make their

way into an echo chamber that makes them hard to examine. And even though the Reactionaries themselves are way too rightist, I think it's good to have their ideas out there in the Hegelian sense of "and then the unexamined-conservatism touched the unexamined-liberalism and in a puff of smoke they merged to magically become the perfect political system!"

Outro

Once again, expect my counterargument to this sometime in the next while. I would be interested in hearing other people's counterarguments in the meantime and am very likely to steal them. I am also likely to ignore some of them if they make arguments I already agree with and so feel no need to debate, but I would still enjoy reading them. Basically I welcome comments and discussion from all sides.

With one exception. Yes, I have included the racist parts of Reactionary philosophy above. Yes, those points need to be debated, and some of that debate may be in favor. But any comment that moves away from the sort of dry scientific racism used to prove or disprove political theorems, and toward the sort where they're just shouting ethnic slurs and attacking racial groups to make their members feel bad, *will* be deleted and the person involved probably IP-banned. I also reserve the right to edit comments that don't quite reach that point but are noticeably in need of rephrasing.