

# The Authentic Reactionary

*Nicolás Gómez Dávila*

Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913–1994) was a reclusive Colombian literary figure who, in the last years of his life, began to garner recognition as one of the most penetrating conservative thinkers of the twentieth century. The scion of an upper-class Bogotá family, he was educated by private tutors in Paris, where prolonged convalescence after an illness ignited a passion for classical literature. While he never attended university, his personal library would grow to more than 30,000 volumes. His reputation in Colombia was such that after the collapse of the military dictatorship in 1958 he was repeatedly offered significant political appointments, which he always refused.

Gómez Dávila's mordant critique of modernity was expressed almost entirely in books of aphorisms, which touch on philosophical, theological, political, and aesthetic themes. He sought to limn a "reactionary" perspective distinct from both the conventional Left and the conventional Right. But he made no effort to promote his intellectual work: indeed, his first book was published in a private edition of only 100 copies, which were presented as gifts to friends. His international reputation spread by word of mouth.

Virtually nothing of his work is yet available in English, beyond a small sample of aphorisms on various websites. However, his complete works have been published in a German translation, prompting sustained engagement with his thought in Central Europe. Significant translations have also been undertaken in French, Italian, and Polish.

The essay below, "El reaccionario auténtico," originally appeared in *Revista Universidad de Antioquia* 240 (April-June 1995), 16–19. It is Gómez Dávila's most sustained attempt to explain his own unique intellectual position, that of an "authentic reactionary."

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The existence of the authentic reactionary is usually a scandal to the progressive. His presence causes a vague discomfort. In the face of the reactionary attitude the progressive experiences a slight scorn, accompanied by surprise and restlessness. In order to soothe his apprehensions, the progressive is in the habit of interpreting this unseasonable and shocking attitude as a guise for self-interest or as a symptom of stupidity; but only the journalist, the politician, and the fool are not secretly flustered before the tenacity with which the loftiest intelligences of the West, for the past one hundred fifty years, amass objections against the modern world. Complacent disdain does not, in fact, seem an adequate rejoinder to an attitude where a Goethe and a Dostoevsky can unite in brotherhood.

But if all the conclusions of the reactionary surprise the progressive, the reactionary stance is by itself disconcerting. That the reactionary protests against progressive society, judges it, and condemns it, and yet is resigned to its current monopoly of history, seems an eccentric position. The radical progressive, on the one hand, does not comprehend how the reactionary condemns an action that he acknowledges, and the liberal progressive, on the other, does not understand how he acknowledges an action that he condemns. The first demands that he relinquish his condemnation if he recognizes the action's necessity, and the second that he not confine himself to abstention from an action that he admits is reprehensible. The former warns him to surrender, the latter to take action. Both censure his passive loyalty in defeat.

The radical progressive and the liberal progressive, in fact, reprove the reactionary in different ways because the one maintains that necessity is reason, while the other affirms that reason is liberty. A different vision of history conditions

their critiques. For the radical progressive, necessity and reason are synonyms: reason is the substance of necessity, and necessity the process in which reason is realized. Together they are a single stream of the standing-reserve of existence.

History for the radical progressive is not merely the sum of what has occurred, but rather an epiphany of reason. Even when reason indicates that conflict is the directional mechanism of history, every triumph results from a necessary act, and the discontinuous series of acts is the path traced by the steps of irresistible reason in advancing over vanquished flesh. The radical progressive adheres to the idea that history admonishes, only because the contour of necessity reveals the features of emergent reason. The course of history itself brings forth the ideal norm that haloes it.

Convinced of the rationality of history, the radical progressive assigns himself the duty of collaborating in its success. The root of ethical obligation lies, for him, in the possibility of our propelling history toward its proper ends. The radical progressive is inclined toward the impending event in order to favor its arrival, because in taking action according to the direction of history individual reason coincides with the reason of the world. For the radical progressive, then, to condemn history is not just a vain undertaking, but also a foolish undertaking. A vain undertaking because history is necessity; a foolish undertaking because history is reason.

The liberal progressive, on the other hand, settles down in pure contingency. Liberty, for him, is the substance of reason, and history is the process in which man realizes his liberty. History for the liberal progressive is not a necessary process, but rather the ascent of human liberty toward full possession of itself. Man forges his own history, imposing on nature the errors of his free will. If hatred and greed drag man

down among bloody mazes, the struggle is joined between perverted freedoms and just freedoms. Necessity is merely the dead weight of our own inertia, and the liberal progressive reckons that good intentions can redeem man, at any moment, from the servitude that oppresses him.

The liberal progressive insists that history conduct itself in a manner compatible with what reason demands, since liberty creates history; and as his liberty also engenders the causes that he champions, no fact is able to take precedence over the right that liberty establishes. Revolutionary action epitomizes the ethical obligation of the liberal progressive, because to break down what impedes it is the essential act of liberty as it is realized. History is an inert material that a sovereign will fashions. For the liberal progressive, then, to resign oneself to history is an immoral and foolish attitude. Foolish because history is freedom; immoral because liberty is our essence.

The reactionary is, nevertheless, the fool who takes up the vanity of condemning history and the immorality of resigning himself to it. Radical progressivism and liberal progressivism elaborate partial visions. History is neither necessity nor freedom, but rather their flexible integration. History is not, in fact, a divine monstrosity. The human cloud of dust does not seem to arise as if beneath the breath of a sacred beast; the epochs do not seem to be ordered as stages in the embryogenesis of a metaphysical animal; facts are not imbricated one upon another as scales on a heavenly fish. But if history is not an abstract system that germinates beneath implacable laws, neither is it the docile fodder of human madness. The whimsical and arbitrary will of man is not its supreme ruler. Facts are not shaped, like sticky, pliable paste, between industrious fingers.

In fact, history results neither from impersonal necessity nor from human caprice, but rather from a dialectic of the will where free choice unfolds into necessary consequences. History does not develop as a unique and autonomous dialectic, which extends in vital dialectic the dialectic of inanimate nature, but rather as a pluralism of dialectical processes, numerous as free acts and tied to the diversity of their fleshly grounds.

If liberty is the creative act of history, if each free act produces a new history, the free creative act is cast upon the world in an irrevocable process. Liberty secretes history as a metaphysical spider secretes the geometry of its web. Liberty is, in fact, alienated from itself in the same gesture in which it is assumed, because free action possesses a coherent structure, an internal organization, a regular proliferation of sequelae. The act unfolds, opens up, and expands into necessary consequences, in a manner compatible with its intimate character and with its intelligible nature. Every act submits a piece of the world to a specific configuration.

History, therefore, is an assemblage of freedoms hardened in dialectical processes. The deeper the layer whence free action gushes forth, the more varied are the zones of activity that the process determines, and the greater its duration. The superficial, peripheral act is expended in biographical episodes, while the central, profound act can create an epoch for an entire society. History is articulated, thus, in instants and epochs: in free acts and in dialectical processes. Instants are its fleeting soul, epochs its tangible body. Epochs stretch out like distances between two instants: its seminal instant, and the instant when the inchoate act of a new life brings it to a close. Upon hinges of freedom swing gates of bronze. Epochs do not have an irrevocable duration: the encounter with processes loom-

ing up from a greater depth can interrupt them; inertia of the will can prolong them. Conversion is possible, passivity ordinary. History is a necessity that freedom produces and chance destroys.

Collective epochs are the result of an active complicity in an identical decision, or of the passive contamination of inert wills; but while the dialectical process in which freedoms have been poured out lasts, the freedom of the nonconformist is twisted into an ineffectual rebellion. Social freedom is not a permanent option, but rather an unforeseen auspiciousness in the conjunction of affairs. The exercise of freedom supposes an intelligence responsive to history because confronting an entire society alienated from liberty, man can only lie in wait for the noisy crackup of necessity. Every intention is thwarted if it is not introduced into the principal fissures of a life.

In the face of history ethical obligation to take action only arises when the conscience consents to a purpose that momentarily prevails, or when circumstances culminate in a conjunction propitious to our freedom. The man whom destiny positions in an epoch without a foreseeable end, the character of which wounds the deepest fibers of his being, cannot heedlessly sacrifice his repugnance to his boldness, nor his intelligence to his vanity. The spectacular, empty gesture earns public applause, but the disdain of those governed by reflection. In the shadowlands of history, man ought to resign himself to patiently undermining human presumption. Man is able, thus, to condemn necessity without contradicting himself, although he is unable to take action except when necessity collapses.

If the reactionary concedes the fruitlessness of his principles and the uselessness of his censures, it is not because the spectacle of human confusion suffices for him. The reactionary does not refrain from taking

action because the risk frightens him, but rather because he judges that the forces of society are at the moment rushing headlong toward a goal that he disdains. Within the current process social forces have carved their channel in bedrock, and nothing will turn their course so long as they have not emptied into the expanse of an unknown plain. The gesticulation of castaways only makes their bodies float along the further bank. But if the reactionary is powerless in our time, his condition obliges him to bear witness to his revulsion. Freedom, for the reactionary, is submission to a mandate.

In fact, even though it be neither necessity nor caprice, history, for the reactionary, is not, for all that, an interior dialectic of the immanent will, but rather a temporal adventure between man and that which transcends him. His labors are traces, on the disturbed sand, of the body of a man and the body of an angel. History for the reactionary is a tatter, torn from man's freedom, fluttering in the breath of destiny. The reactionary cannot be silent because his liberty is not merely a sanctuary where man escapes from deadening routine and takes refuge in order to be his own master. In the free act the reactionary does not just take possession of his essence. Liberty is not an abstract possibility of choosing among known goods, but rather the concrete condition in which we are granted the possession of new goods. Freedom is not a momentary judgment between conflicting instincts, but rather the summit from which man contemplates the ascent of new stars among the luminous dust of the starry sky. Liberty places man among prohibitions that are not physical and imperatives that are not vital. The free moment dispels the unreal brightness of the day, in order that the motionless universe that slides its fleeting lights over the shuddering of our flesh, might rise up on the horizon of the soul.

If the progressive casts himself into the future, and the conservative into the past, the reactionary does not measure his anxieties with the history of yesterday or with the history of tomorrow. The reactionary does not extol what the next dawn must bring, nor is he terrified by the last shadows of the night. His dwelling rises up in that luminous space where the essential accosts him with its immortal presence. The reactionary escapes the slavery of history because he pursues in the human wilderness the trace of divine footsteps. Man and his deeds are, for the reactionary, a servile and mortal flesh that breathes gusts from beyond the mountains. To be reactionary is to champion causes that do

not turn up on the notice board of history, causes where losing does not matter. To be reactionary is to know that we only discover what we think we invent; it is to admit that our imagination does not create, but only lays bare smooth bodies. To be reactionary is not to espouse settled cases, nor to plead for determined conclusions, but rather to submit our will to the necessity that does not constrain, to surrender our freedom to the exigency that does not compel; it is to find sleeping certainties that guide us to the edge of ancient pools. The reactionary is not a nostalgic dreamer of a canceled past, but rather a hunter of sacred shades upon the eternal hills.

*Trans. RYV*