Prejudice Versus Diversity: An Untimely Case for Classical Conservatism

by Christopher DeGroot (July 2018)

François Flameng and Paul Helleu, John Singer Sargent, 1880

For many intellectuals, diversity now serves as a powerful idol. Having sympathy for "the excluded," or, anyway, a careerist desire to appear "moral," they want us to believe

that diversity is an unmixed good. They seem not to know, or at least care, that history is not on their side, that diversity, for good reasons, was always considered a source of conflict in the history of peoples and nations. In Victor Davis Hanson's words,

> Ancient Greece's numerous enemies eventually overran the 1,500 city-states because the Greeks were never able to sublimate their parochial, tribal, and ethnic differences to unify under a common Hellenism. The Balkans were always a lethal powder keg due to the region's vastly different religions and ethnicities where East and West traditionally collided—from Roman and Byzantine times through the Ottoman imperial period to the bloody twentieth century. Such diversity often caused destructive conflicts of ethnic and religious hatred. Europe for centuries did not celebrate the religiously diverse mosaic of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, but instead tore itself apart in a half-millennium of killing and warring that continued into the late twentieth century in places like Northern Ireland.

> In multiracial, multiethnic, and multi-religious societies—such as contemporary India or the Middle East—violence is the rule in the absence of unity. Even the common banner of a brutal communism could not force all the diverse religions and races of the Soviet Union to get along. Japan, meanwhile, does not admit many immigrants, while Germany has welcomed over a million, mostly young Muslim men from the war-torn Middle East. The result is that Japan is in many ways more stable than Germany, which is reeling over terrorist violence and the need for assimilation and integration of diverse newcomers with little desire to become fully German.

Today in the United States, where assimilation has become "racist," the diversity idol finds politics descending into factional interests. Meanwhile, from school suspensions to the Academy Awards to Google engineers, it is constantly assumed that wherever there is not racial parity, discrimination is present by definition. Little matter that this is an obvious fallacy; in human affairs logic is weak compared to irrational feeling.

While all this is difficult enough, the most intractable problem with diversity, it is necessary to understand, is inextricably bound up with perception itself. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1892), William James made this striking remark about the self and other people: "He is for me a mere part of the world; for him it is I who am the mere part. Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place." Selfhood—with its inexhaustible particularity—is the source of all perception, thought, knowledge, belief, and value. Now this renders fraught, in an epistemic sense, our relations with other people, who, like us, perceive only from their own point of view, that is to say, from their own experience, from the self in the deepest sense. Given life's irreducibly subjective character, understanding one another, and therefore, communicating about how to solve or deal with our common problems, is bound to be trying much of the time, especially in diverse societies, as I shall argue. We have all learned to be wary of prejudice, lest we should be unfair, but there is, finally, no belief, no knowledge, and no value without it (in the sense of preconceived judgment or opinion, which sense should not be confounded with sheer bias), because these all presuppose a particular subject and are impossible without it. (To be clear, this claim is not made in support of relativism. It has to do with the nature of belief, knowledge, and value; namely, with how the mind arrives at them.)

Moreover, as James' younger brother Henry, himself a genius of consciousness, observed in a letter of November 1, 1863 to Thomas Sergeant Perry, "willfully, intentionally prejudiced persons are very rare. Every one certainly is more or less prejudiced, but 'unbeknown' to themselves." The reason, for Henry James, is that "prejudice [is] a judgment formed on a subject upon *data* furnished, not by the subject itself, but by the mind which regards it." What is more, "these *data* are the fruits of the subtlest influences,—birth, education, association." We can see here that the James brothers, in their different ways, are both describing the limits of human reason. "Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place," amounts to the insight that the self comprehends "*data* furnished, not by the subject itself, but by the mind which regards it." And, as we can all discover (to at least some degree) through introspection, "these *data* are the fruits of the subtlest influences,—birth, education, association." Our endowed nature, our self, interacts with the external world, the two producing experiences which become knowledge, which is, in a sense, a kind of prejudice: for we exist in time and bring the past with us into the present and into the future. The process being person-specific, it follows that "every one certainly is more or less prejudiced, but 'unbeknown' to themselves," because in order to transcend all our prejudice we should have to get out from our own experience—which is impossible, as it would be, in Thomas Nagel's apt phrase, "a view from nowhere."

In *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988) the literary critic Christopher Ricks, with his characteristic acuity, noted that "not only there is no substantive to realize the quality of mind which is the opposite of prejudice, there is no verb to realize the activity of mind which is the opposite of prejudicing. As a result, 'unprejudiced' summons the absence

of a vice and not the presence of a virtue." There is no such substantive or verb because prejudice derives from the particular histories of men and women. Therefore, in contemplating the opposite of prejudice we are not dealing with objectivity, or impartiality, or what you will, but literally with non-sense. Prejudice, then, has a deep and irreplaceable value owing to the limits of reason itself. Indeed, prejudice is justified by the nature of the human mind itself.

What is more, prejudice corresponds to the collective knowledge, prudence, and wisdom of a culture, as it is transmitted through the generations in the form of certain customs. Without that inheritance it may be exceedingly difficult for people to understand each other, or anyway, to come to agreement, because they will be limited by their lack of shared prejudice. "It is important for our view of things," Wittgenstein wrote in his notebook, "that someone may feel concerning certain people that their inner life will always be a mystery to him. That he will never understand them." Ray Monk, his excellent biographer and explicator, comments in *The Duty of Genius* (1991): "This is because the commonality of experience [or prejudice] required to interpret . . . [them] will be missing." Wittgenstein might have learned something from the now devalued philosopher F.H. Bradley, had his erstwhile teacher Bertrand Russell, an exceptionally vain and ambitious man, not been so unfair to the thought of the senior philosopher who wrote in his *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874): "We see what we perceive; and the object of our perceptions is qualified by the premises of our knowledge, by our previous experiences." Compare this with Wittgenstein's epigram: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him." The reason is that, as with quite different peoples and their respective cultures, there would be no "commonality of experience," no "premises of our knowledge" derived from

prejudice or “our previous experiences.”

We can never get away from our own perspective; we can never get away from our very self. So true is this that we tend not to notice just how much it influences our perceptions and beliefs, even as we take for granted its veracity. I speak to another in a language he knows, in a language we share, but despite the *intentions* of my words, their *significance*, for him, shall be translated, so to say; determined by his own nature, with its particular context and history. Nor can I transcend my own limits in regard to him. Everyone’s world lies in his words, and everyone is like a ray of a darkling sun that can see only portions of the burning sphere he and others collectively compose. So that ultimately, the biggest obstacle for government is simply phenomenological experience itself, which, insofar as it finds us interacting with diverse human beings, necessarily produces all sorts of incoherence and effectively solipsistic exchanges.

For as Wittgenstein emphasized, a person’s “inner life”—the cognitive state in which, drawing on past experience, he perceives the present—in order to be understood by others, requires a common (and accurately perceived) outer criteria: rules and customs and the like whereby people communicate. Now it is just here that the hardest problem with diversity emerges. Again, understanding each other, in many instances, presupposes what Bradley called “the premises of our knowledge,” that is, shared prejudice, “previous experiences.” To be sure, there are plenty of times when diverse peoples can overcome their epistemic difficulties. It would be very naïve, though, to think that this is always possible. Further, in view of the historical evils associated with diversity, we should take care to not have overmuch faith in our ability to bring about unity in diversity by way of mutual understanding.

We have all had the experience of arguing in vain, of saying the truth but still finding that our interlocutor just does not understand (perhaps because he is unwilling to do so). Now this experience is quite common even among intimates. How much more so when diverse people interact, lacking shared prejudice and so the affinity of mind which uniquely facilitates understanding. Besides, even when people *do* understand one another, it hardly follows that diversity ceases to be the source of strife that it has always been. Certain conflicts have persisted for centuries, millennia even. Integration is the exception in human affairs; conflict, the rule.

Without shared prejudice, exchanges more often bear out the effective solipsism Hobbes described in *The Leviathan* (1651), "men . . . [giving] different names to one and the same thing, from the difference of their own passions." For the thing, or object, or event, or whatever is perceived; then it is evaluated or judged according to *internal* criteria (the result, in part, of a particulate cultural history): and finally re-presented, and by no means in the same manner to everyone. Each person's world, indeed, is his own re-presentation. And as we understand from the word *each*, indicating plurality, there is only so much similarity, overlap, continuity. Hence, then, the need for prejudice, in the epistemically robust sense of the word. Of course, in our touchy age of equality, prejudice, as most people conceive of it, denotes only bias, a bad thing. Since our language has been debased, few of us now have an appreciation for how absolutely indispensable prejudice is. Yet it was central, significantly, to the thought of both of those wise men, Edmund Burke and Dr. Johnson, and in our time another excellent man, Theodore Dalrymple, has made a strong case for it in his *In Praise of Prejudice* (2007).

In *Implicit Meanings* (1975), the anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote:

> In the normal process of interpretation, the existing scheme of assumptions tends to be protected from challenge, for the learner recognizes and absorbs cues which harmonize with past experience and usually ignores cues which are discordant. Thus, those assumptions which have worked well before are reinforced. Because the selection and treatment of new experiences validates the principles which have been learned, the structure of established assumptions can be applied quickly and automatically to current problems of interpretation. In animals this stabilizing, selective tendency serves the biological function of survival. In men the same tendency appears to govern learning. If every new experience laid all past interpretations open to doubt, no scheme of established assumptions could be developed and no learning could take place.

This passage is fascinating. Learning, and therefore becoming, depends on what we *already* are. In making sense of the world, we are sensibly intolerant: we must hold fast to our guiding assumptions; otherwise what has illuminated our life so far shall find us in darkness, a fearsome place to be. Because our very survival depends on maintaining past and present principles, in interpreting events we naturally strive to preserve them. We are naturally threatened by people who don't share that which both grounds and centers our being, namely, our knowledge rooted in the past. It seems insane, no doubt, that so many people should deem a politician evil just because he does not share their beliefs. And yet, when we consider that we are determined largely by anxiety, fear and other irrational passions, the widespread phenomenon is hardly

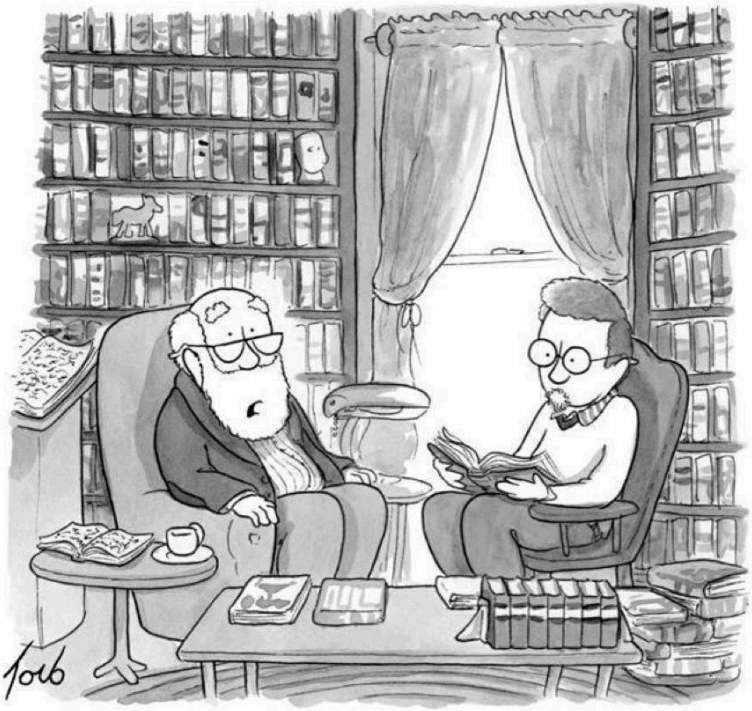
surprising. The most important thing to know, the takeaway from these remarks, is that *prejudice is justified by the nature of the human mind itself*. There is a lesson here, then, for the many academics and administrators who are so concerned about "implicit bias." For it is because prejudice is intrinsic to reason itself that "implicit bias" does not predict discriminatory behavior, and that changes to "implicit bias" do not change behavior, either.

It will now be easy to see what makes revolution so undesirable: It is incoherent. Though it wants to improve the human condition, revolution functions to undermine an essential epistemic foundation, like a man who thinks he can become a sprinter by chopping off his legs. Far better to be conservative, because unlike the revolutionary, the conservative is a kind of nurturer: As the gardener tends to his plants—ensuring that they get the sunlight, water and nutrients they need—so the conservative takes care that the state shall be consistent with the nature of men and women, as determined by their culture and tradition, and indeed by the working character of the human mind itself. In contrast, the revolutionary, like the facile diversity enthusiast, overlooks the necessity of unifying principles, as if peoples, with their specific values and histories, were as malleable and interchangeable as the nifty gadgets that give contemporary life an appearance of natural ease and comfort. Such an approach makes democracy so much divisive chaos, a popularity contest between irreconcilable groups who are keen to advance their interests to the exclusion of others, although this may transpire under such lofty terms as equality, fairness, and justice.

"The freedom of the press," said Schopenhauer in his essay "On Government (1897)," "may be regarded as a permission to sell

poison—poison for the heart and the mind. There is no idea so foolish but that it cannot be put into the heads of the ignorant and incapable multitude, especially if the idea holds out some prospect of any gain or advantage." Like other Americans, Thomas Jefferson initially had high hopes for newspapers; the spread of information and communication, it seemed to him, would facilitate argument and debate. Yet his enthusiasm soon gave way to cynicism, and on June 14, 1807 he wrote in a letter to John Norvell: "The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods & errors." More than two hundred years later, there is still a good deal of truth in this. To read the left and the right on one another is to behold "falsehoods & errors" and mutual unwitting incomprehension on both sides. Nor is this a wonder, for an objective notion of truth, like disinterested contextual inquiry, is of little interest to most people (including intellectuals); what matters most to them is what they can *do* with "the truth." And in general, belief is much more important to us humans than "truth," the latter often being but a means to the former, however unknowingly.

Thus the Democrats, because they are unwilling to recognize that it was they and the Republicans—our other business party, as it were—who produced the populist Donald Trump, have been trying to convince the public that he is Vladimir Putin's puppet, and that Russian interference is the reason for President Trump's election: and now, as these efforts appear to be unsuccessful, the Democrats are devoting much time and energy to portraying the man as a serial sexual assaulter. In all this any objective notion of truth or notion of intellectual responsibility is of course quite irrelevant; people have certain ends, and "truth" is put in their service.



"Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it."

Although relativism is a ridiculous concept, being self-refuting by definition, it seems only fitting that so many intellectuals should take its veracity for granted: after all, what do they know but sheer bias and subjectivity, especially given the decline of intellectual standards that has been occurring since the late 1960s? Rigorous and detached inquiry into the nature of a thing—what have they *ever* known of that? As with intellectuals, so with ordinary people. In the normal course of things, a person asserts his opinion and, above all, *feelings* associated with some subject. Next, he proceeds to unconsciously misinterpret, in an *evaluative* manner, those who disagree with him, in order to advance his own

agenda, whatever that may be. Nor is he even aware of the incoherence. Now this description holds for nearly all mankind, the well-educated by no means excepted. Indeed, it is they who reason in this fashion most of all, thanks to their knowledge and inclinations, their ambition and vanity. It follows that democracy—where it would be determined solely by coherent debate—is impossible by definition. Alas, what is called democracy was best captured by Jose Ortega Gasset's grim description of mass men in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930): "The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will . . . The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select."

Hence, then, the need for a culture to be guided by wise prejudice in the form of certain shared customs, allowing mankind to have less need of engaging in the arguments at which it is so poor on the whole, as well as to preserve standards of excellence and thereby excellence itself. It is necessary, in other words, for there to be not a diverse but a fairly homogenous social order, in the classical conservative sense. As James Madison put it in "*Federalist No. 10* (1787)," "the latent causes of faction are…sown in the nature of man," and therefore, even homogeneous cultures struggle to agree on how they shall live together. Politics is all the more difficult when people do not presuppose common values and interests. Though some diversity of opinion is requisite to a healthy democracy, there is a point after which diversity becomes incoherent; and as a general rule, the less about which there is to disagree, the better for people and their politics. Of course, in today's left-centric climate, any case for cultural homogeny is likely to be controversial. People who advocate it will be readily conflated with identitarians,

for example. And yet this merely reflects our historical ignorance. For the Founding Fathers, as for de Maistre, Burke, Hume, and others, cultural homogeny was desirable on account of natural limits. Nor must it commit one to racism, xenophobia, or any other moral evil.

Although almost all sociologists are liberals, some of the best work in their field can be used to support classical conservatism. In *The Righteous Mind* (2012), Jonathan Haidt provides an overview of Robert Putnam's research, which is such bad news for progressives.

> Robert Putnam has provided a wealth of evidence that Burke and Smith were right . . . religions make Americans into "better neighbors and better citizens" . . . the active ingredient that made people more virtuous was enmeshing them into relationships with their co-religionists. Anything that binds people together into dense networks of trust makes people less selfish.

> In an earlier study, Putnam found that ethnic diversity had the opposite effect. In a paper revealingly titled "E Pluribus Unum," Putnam examined the level of social capital in hundreds of American communities and discovered that high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity seem to cause a reduction in social capital. That may not surprise you; people are racist, you might think, and so they don't trust people who don't look like themselves. But that's not quite right. Putnam's survey was able to distinguish two different kinds of social capital: bridging capital refers to trust between groups, between people who have different values and identities, while bonding capital refers to trust within groups. Putnam

> found that diversity reduced both kinds of social capital. Here's his conclusion: "Diversity seems to trigger not in-group/ out-group division, but anomie or social isolation. In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down'—that is, to pull in like a turtle."

So much, then, for all the high-toned talk about the value of diversity. The thing is largely a vice, not a virtue. In the abstract, of course, diversity sounds wonderful: we'll all be enriched by each other, aided in this by our tolerance and respect for people who are unlike us. In actual experience, diversity is far more complicated, limiting, and finally destructive. Yet the mind tending to believe what it *wants* to be true rather than what *is* true, people will go on believing otherwise, like a crazy man who drowns since he insisted that he could breathe underwater.

Neuroscience, too, supports classical conservative political philosophy. Says Haidt:

> Oxytocin should bond us to our partners and our groups, so that we can more effectively compete with other groups. It should not bond us to humanity in general.

> Several recent studies have validated this prediction. In one set of studies, Dutch men played a variety of economic games while sitting alone in cubicles, linked via computers into small teams. 33 Half of the men had been given a nasal spray of oxytocin, and half got a placebo spray. The men who received oxytocin made less selfish

> decisions—they cared more about helping their group, but they showed no concern at all for improving the outcomes of men in the other groups. In one of these studies, oxytocin made men more willing to hurt other teams (in a prisoner's dilemma game) because doing so was the best way to protect their own group. In a set of follow-up studies, the authors found that oxytocin caused Dutch men to like Dutch names more and to value saving Dutch lives more (in trolley-type dilemmas). Over and over again the researchers looked for signs that this increased in-group love would be paired with increased out-group hate (toward Muslims), but they failed to find it. 34 Oxytocin simply makes people love their in-group more. It makes them parochial altruists. The authors conclude that their findings "provide evidence for the idea that neurobiological mechanisms in general, and oxytocinergic systems in particular, evolved to sustain and facilitate within-group."

Such are the limits of affection, as we conservatives have long known. But for all its special value, there is a danger with our conservatism. While value depends on the past and on recognizing what is greater than the self, as T.S. Eliot warned in *After Strange Gods* (1934), we should not "associate tradition with the immovable," nor "think of it as something hostile to all change," nor yet "aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity." We must try to discover, as the philosophic poet said, "what is the best life for us . . . as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire." In this project, we must take especial care not to overlook the well-being of the poor, a vice that is all too common even among persons who call

themselves conservatives. The brunt of this duty falls to politicians, who must endeavor to be *statesmen*, advancing laws and policies that aim to produce gainful opportunities for ordinary people, as opposed to just maximizing profits for elite international capitalists.

The first thing, however, is to learn to see well, appreciating what we owe to the past, including our *essentially* prejudiced understanding itself. In this way we can cultivate a sense of gratitude, of which there is too little in our time.

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