

Old Paradigm, Oldest War

by James Como



Consider a (truncated) mind experiment directed towards the restoration of civil discourse, restoration, that is, of an age when, say, Bob Hope could joke about Dems and Johnny Carson about President Reagan *without malice or as an attempt to destroy*. It requires a paradigm shift, viz., a much-broadened conception of The Center that would push the extremes of discourse much further to the fringes, towards quarantine. That is, if we imagine a political spectrum with a scale of ten, we would define the center as anywhere from, say, 3.5 to 7.5, with anyone within that range simply respecting the legitimacy of anyone else in the same range: no slander, condescension, obscene or barbarous mockery; neither ostracism nor outrage. "We are the party of the center," we would hear Chuck Shumer telling Kathy Griffin, "and you are not."

Of course we would need both definition (perhaps by example,

both affirmative and negative?) and patience with porous boundaries. And more: Neo-Centrists would have to eschew any alliance with non-Centrist sympathizers, policing their nether precincts (e.g. as William Buckley did with the Birchers) for what should be – would be – sources of embarrassment no matter their putative usefulness. In short, anyone in this New Center would dismiss (reasonably, not rudely) anyone near to him and her but *outside the Centrist range*. The crazies would be marginalized. I know, I know: the fly in this ointment is the lack of trust: centrists of the left and right not trusting each other. What I'm really up to is the establishment of Lord Moulton's Middle Domain, the domain of manners, where reigns – what a lovely idea, this – “obedience to the unenforceable.”

But I am also describing a process, not an event, the sort of process that would require adherence to the old adage, “fake it till you make it.” To achieve some clarity we might consider three vectors: the direction of an attitude, the intensity with which it is held, and its salience to whomever is holding it. (i.e. I am a New York Knicks fan [direction], I could root for no other team [intensity], I no longer follow basketball [salience].) For example, the anti-Trump people hold their attitudes intensely, but not all allow the attitude to guide – indeed to rule – their lives. Some can actually engage the opposition. They would be in. It just might bring a dysentropic civility to what should be a civil society.

How? By mitigating – ending it is a hopeless aspiration – the Old War. Ian Tuttle's “Everyone an Enemy” (*National Review*, May 29, 2017), describing our domestic *sans culottes* (e.g. Antifa) and their machinations, is dispositive in its exposition and sounds the appropriate alarm. Yet, although the trees seem new, the forest isn't. Roger Scruton's *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* and, differently, Jonah Golberg's *Liberal Fascism* provide both an intellectual and historical context for the discussion, as do Buckley's

synecdochal *God and Man at Yale*, Eric Hoffer's *True Believer*, Kenneth Minogue's admirably moderate *The Liberal Mind*, James Burnham's *Suicide of the West*, Thomas Molnar's *Utopia: the Perennial Heresy*, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, and Thomas Sowell's *A Conflict of Visions*. Indeed, anyone interested in a healthy dose of *deja vu* should scout the NR archives where, in the issue of July 2, 1968, he will find Jeffrey Hart's "The Coming Revolution in America," in which the influences of Jurgen Habermas and other denizens of the Frankfurt School are described. (Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, dedicated to Satan, was yet to arrive, but consider *The Authoritarian Personality*, by the Frankfurt School guru Theodor Adorn and others. It is not without some small merits, but it is without one very large one. The Marxist Adorno, in writing a preposterously tendentious book, seems to have begun with a conclusion – people on the right are authoritarian – and looked for criteria that would include stereotypes of the right *but none of the left*, not even the Stalinoid, fellow-travelers of his own day.)

A mere list of the left rules of engagement would open eyes: universities are worlds unto themselves: virtual No-Go Zones for people on the right; civility is weakness and complicity; truth is a hegemonic, Western, oppressive concept, as is objectivity; violence is symmetrical, no matter the appearance of difference (bombs in Syria deserve riots on campuses and in streets); conducive narratives (e.g. of oppression) must be generated no matter the facts; hyperbole or *ad hominem* when supporting the Cause is not merely justified but obligatory; outrageous behavior (and speech) that does ring an alarm is excused as either comically-intended or merely descriptive; all media must be engaged: there is no neutral ground; all mischief is not only permitted and invited but compulsory: throwing sand in the public eye brings confusion, confusion opportunity; a totalitarian reality must be generated, culture changed top to bottom; the New Man (beginning with Minogue's "generic man") is moldable and must be molded; group

conformity *will* be enforced.

Like too many of my neckties, everything old is new again. This mess of pottage was diagnosed more than fifty years ago by Leland Griffin in, for example, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements" and "The Rhetoric of the 'New Left' Movement: Part I." Some twenty years thereafter arrived John W. Bowers' and Donovan J. Ochs's *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (its newest edition, the third, coming in 2010, with the help of Richard J. Jensen and David P. Schultz). In it, the authors map out (and give examples of) the "strategies of agitation": petition, promulgation, solidification, polarization, nonviolent resistance, escalation/confrontation, Gandhi and guerilla, and revolution. (In their cartography of "strategies of control" they include avoidance, suppression, adjustment, and capitulation, omitting a possible penultimate step: civil war – see Portland)

And like the Palestinians, Hillary has also lost three times (remember her early Clinton administration failed health care putsch?) but cannot accept it, just as some Spaniards cannot accept Franco's win and so remove monuments. Hell, present day Iran can't accept that Greece finally kicked Persian ass twenty-five hundred years ago and so must make war on the West. From without *and from within* we have one long war, it seems, against the West: its culture, values and achievements; and a war with deeply rooted mental dispositions.

The roots of this Old War are embedded largely in the psyche of those who inhabit the left, as opposed to those on the right, who, for the most part, want to be left alone. Is it nihilism? anarchism? solipsism? jealousy? self-loathing (among those here who are contemporary versions of Lenin's useful idiots)? a useful mix of narcissistic posturing, moral exhibitionism, and post-adolescent entitlement and identity-seeking? No matter: they will live off the accumulated capital of Western republican virtues. License will be taken, if not given. (Witness recent court decisions.) The fronts, too, are

old: ideas, communication media, street life, language. C. S. Lewis's Uncle Screwtape counseled that subversion may best begin with the perversion of language.

Moreover, this is no conspiracy, for none is required. Consider: two men utterly unknown to each other attend a Mets game, one seated by the right field foul pole, the other at the left field pole. A Met wins the game in the bottom of the ninth with a home run. Both stand and cheer similarly and simultaneously. Was there a "conspiracy"? Of course not. Don't need one. That's how Prime Minister May has described (finally!) the dynamic of Radical Islamism, with or without direct orders and instructions from HQ. The same is happening with the Dems and the MSM (although in this case they are both in left field). After a while each group learns to pick up cues. They are the equivalent of being a Met fan at Citi Field, seeking to set the agenda, not only by cherry-picking "flag" issues (e.g. Ferguson) but by insinuating question-begging questions into the culture (e.g. "is healthcare a right or a privilege?"). In the present case, a single, simple fundamental premise is held in common: anything that Trump does must be, not only opposed but the basis of an accusation. From that premise emerges the rule: make mischief, no matter how opportunistic, or cynical, or abusive of thought and language.

Systematic psycho-sociological research supports this attitudinal group-think claim. We know from Asch ("Attitudes as Cognitive Structures") and from Hovland, Janis and Kelly ("A Summary of Experimental Studies of Opinion Change") that consensual judgments matter. Attitudes – ordering and prioritizing data, opinion and judgments – emerge from group approval (depending on the value of group membership to a given member). Moreover, the wider context (for example, long-standing ideology, toxic hatred, political feuds) reinforce prevailing attitudes. Finally, the more dynamic the group the stronger the attitude. Tempting here is to apply this thinking

to our current public discourse: Colbert shamelessly playing to his amen chorus, MSNBC and CNN commentators insulting the president outright – a self-reinforcing loop.

All of which brings me to a penultimate point, one culled from a lifetime of listening to race-talk, other identity-politics exhortations, and all other forms of “community” appeals (the 1962 edition of Nisbet, re-titled *Community and Power*, provided much steam): collectivism is of the left, from invitations to cocktail parties, to Dem cohesion, unto Marxist collectivism. It is their theology. No distortion is noticed, those that are noticed, are welcome, and those who make the distortions gain that clubby pat of approval. People on the right, on the other hand, are like Red Sox ballplayers in the eighties: twenty-five guys leave the clubhouse at the same time, headed for the same hotel, in twenty-five different cabs.

There exist tactical responses to fringe enormities, “gotcha” tools in the spirit of that war but outside the spirit of the centrist – and candidly retrogressive – paradigm I’ve recommended at the top of this meditation, that model which, certainly, would not end the one war that has raged for millennia. Why? Perhaps its roots lie deeper than the human psyche and reach unto the depths of our souls? Perhaps before the Second Coming any peace is beyond all reckoning?