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Debate club

by *Peter Berkowitz*

A review of The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left by Yuval Levin.

Our politics, we lament, is disfigured by a deep and ugly partisan divide. The left accuses the right of starving the government of funds needed to perform its essential functions and of wishing to impose on the country outworn and repressive moral and political beliefs. The right accuses the left of betraying the American experiment in individual freedom and limited government by maintaining a massive and ever-expanding welfare state. The left believes that the right is selfish and cruel. The right believes that behind the left's vaunted compassion is an impulse to ruthlessly control people's conduct and prescribe correct beliefs. And partisans of both sides find justification for their uncompromising ways in the conviction that the other side's partisanship has never been more shameless or extreme.

Various explanations have been proffered to account for what political scientists call polarization. The right points a finger at higher education, particularly at our leading colleges and universities, for force-feeding undergraduates a rigorously regulated diet of progressive dogma. And the left, particularly that part of it ensconced at America's leading colleges and universities, unabashedly argues that conservatism is fueled by racism, sexism, and an irrational reaction against threats to traditional ways of life.

Political scientists observe that contemporary polarization is driven by sorting, or the steady flow over the last half century of men and women of the left into the Democratic party and men and women of the right into the Republican party, so that conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have become vanishing breeds. Some political scientists also point to the rise of the primary system, which has taken power away from party bosses grinding out deals among competing interests in smoke-filled back rooms and shifted it to the most activist and ardent voters in both parties who tend to demand ideological purity from candidates.

While few social scientists doubt the reality of intense polarization, they do quarrel about its scope and center of gravity. Some argue that polarization is primarily a phenomenon concentrated among political and intellectual elites but does not reach great swathes of individuals, particularly in the middle class, who, while preferring one party or the other,

exhibit respect for the complexity of the issues and have remained open to arguments coming from both sides. Others insist that polarization pervades American political culture and reaches all the way down.

Behind the crossfire of left and right vituperation and the comparatively demure scholarly debate about the locus of polarization lies the widely shared opinion that partisanship is, whichever way you look at it, a pathology from which relief should be sought. Seldom considered is the possibility that, although its intensity may wax and wane, partisanship is an irreducible feature of the American constitutional tradition, and more generally of modern liberal democracy.

This neglected possibility is raised by Yuval Levin in his fascinating new book, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left*. A senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Center in Washington, D.C., and the founder and editor of *National Affairs*, Levin has taken the bold step of attempting to shed light on contemporary politics and public policy by turning to political philosophy and history. Levin is uniquely well-positioned to take that bold step, having obtained a Ph.D. from the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and having worked in Washington as a congressional staffer, as the chief of staff of the President's Council on Bioethics, and on the domestic policy staff of the George W. Bush White House. It is Levin's contention that bitter public policy debates between left and right today—about economics, the environment, culture, and much else—do not divide arbitrarily and cannot be explained merely as a function of the configuration of contemporary politics. Rather, he maintains, disagreements about public policy can be traced to deep-rooted assumptions about nature, human nature, reason, society, and justice. And recovering an understanding of these deep roots, he contends, provides an enhanced appreciation of what is at stake in our differences of opinion about how to govern the nation, and may even lead to more measured and productive partisan debate.

To accomplish his task, Levin turns to “the great debate” between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine about the French Revolution. Burke, the eminent Whig statesman and the father of modern conservatism, denounced the French Revolution in 1790 in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He argued that the uprising against the monarchy, aristocracy, and clergy by intellectuals and the common people was the first “total revolution,” an attempt not merely to alter government but to uproot old beliefs, practices, and associations in accordance with a novel theory, and replace them with a new form of social and political life dictated by pure reason. Paine, an immigrant to America from England who, in 1776 in *Common Sense*, brilliantly expounded the principles on which the American Revolution was based, responded to Burke in 1791. In the *Rights of Man*, Paine derided Burke as an apologist for privilege and the past, and defended the French Revolution as being grounded in the right of the people to rid themselves, from the ground up, of any political order that does not protect their natural rights.

As Levin shows with impressive learning and a rare capacity to enter into the spirit of both parties to the controversy, the great debate was about more than the French Revolution. In developing their arguments, Burke and Paine laid the groundwork for two rival schools of thought about liberal democracy; these schools set forth fundamental alternatives to conceiving the challenge of organizing political life around the belief that human beings are by nature free and equal. Paine, Levin argues, stands for a “progressive liberalism” that seeks to bring political society into conformity with an abstract model of political perfection that involves freeing the individual from the constraints imposed on him not only by arbitrary or overreaching laws, but also by “his time, his place, and his relations to others.” Burke champions a “conserving liberalism” that discerned in Britain’s established institutions and inherited morals and principles political wisdom in light of which prudent reform could be responsibly undertaken. Levin demonstrates that while each of these fundamental alternatives puts liberty at the center of politics, each assesses differently the structure, content, and social and political requirements of liberty.

The bulk of Levin’s book is devoted to examining these fundamental alternatives. This is an arduous and delicate task because neither Burke nor Paine was a systematic philosopher. Burke served in the British Parliament as a member of the House of Commons for almost thirty years. Paine was a political activist and perhaps the most influential American polemicist of the Revolutionary era. Their writings, and in the case of Burke his magnificent speeches, advocated or opposed particular policies and actions. Nevertheless, Burke and Paine well understood that their political positions had philosophical underpinnings and they found it on occasion useful to their cause to appeal directly to those underpinnings. Levin shows that when Burke’s and Paine’s scattered remarks on philosophical principles are carefully gathered and analyzed against the background of their careers, they form coherent political philosophies. And these political philosophies, Levin persuasively argues, enriched their thinking and gave a consistent texture and steady direction to their political judgments.

Following in the footsteps of John Locke, Paine finds the standard for judging government in the natural condition of mankind. In that pre-political condition, human beings come to light as equal individuals, untouched by social distinctions or hierarchies, and free in the crucial sense that they are not subject to the arbitrary will of other men or human institutions. The most basic aim of government is to safeguard this natural freedom and equality. Since no individual by right exercises authority over another, the most basic political expression of natural freedom and equality is the requirement that government be based on the consent of the governed. Further, in accordance with man’s natural condition, political society must be rigorously egalitarian: Neither inherited social standing nor birth must confer political privilege. Government should be oriented toward providing the widest possible latitude of choice consistent with a like latitude for others. To properly orient government, it is necessary to liberate human reason from the distorting constraints of superstition and tradition, society and history. Once liberated, reason can develop a science of politics based on objective and universal principles; the science culminates in the construction and

maintenance of rational political institutions and laws. Political equality makes it possible to draw enlightened and upright individuals into government, who will set their private interest aside and implement reason's law in accordance with the public interest. Given reason's abundant capacity to guide political life and man's broad ability to know and honor reason, partisanship in politics can only reflect intellectual and moral failure. Thus, Paine declares, "I wish with all the devotion of a Christian that the names of Whig and Tory may never more be mentioned." Revolution is justified in extreme circumstances: When an irretrievably corrupt government tramples on natural rights, then, as Paine exhorted his fellow Americans in *Common Sense*, "we have it in our power to begin the world over again." But even in the absence of revolution, individuals should not feel themselves bound to the past. It is the universal and timeless principles of politics, Paine maintains, and not the ways of our ancestors or society that should guide conduct in the present.

Burke's thinking is informed by an opinion about nature very different from Paine's conception of solitary and asocial man. For Burke, man is by nature a social animal: Human beings are always living in a complex web of relations to other human beings and bound by obligations that tie each individual not only to the living but also to the dead and those not yet born. Political society does not derive its legitimacy from consent but rather from its ability to satisfy human needs. Individual liberty may be the highest need satisfied by politics, but satisfying it does not consist primarily in the enumeration of rights but in respecting duties, exercising restraint, maintaining soundly structured institutions, and adjusting laws to the habits, sentiments, and passions of the people. Political analysis is led astray by the search for abstract principles of reason; it should rely instead on study of "the history and character of one's own society." Principles of justice are embedded in long-standing practices and traditions, discerned on the basis of experience, and implemented by prudence or practical judgment. Since "change is the most powerful law of nature," statesmen must constantly adjust, balance, and calibrate, crafting reforms that proceed gradually, incrementally, and in keeping with the spirit of the people and the principles that have served them well. While Burke believed in human equality, he thought that preparation for the hard task of governing required the kind of leisure and education typical of a natural aristocracy within a free society. Because of the limits of human reason—both its inability to resolve the deepest philosophical issues and its weakness in directing the passions and disciplining the imagination—a large role in political life must be reserved for "prescription," or the presumption in favor of the long-standing institutions of civil society, particularly family and faith, that mold morals. Political parties "must ever exist in a free country" since citizens uniting around their favored principles is the best way to nurture the variety of principles on which freedom depends. Revolution of the sort seen in France is always wrong; it undermines the freedom in whose name it is undertaken by destroying the manners, mores, and attachments that restrain the human lust for power.

Although—or because—his is one of the most sensible and shrewdest conservative voices in the public square today, Levin maintains an admirably disinterested posture throughout his presentation of the fundamental alternatives represented by Burke and Paine. Even in his conclusion, which sketches moderating lessons right and left can learn from “the defining disagreement of the political order of modern liberalism,” Levin studiously avoids declaring a victor.

And yet Levin’s evenhanded presentation highlights Burke’s superiority. The American constitutional tradition—and the tradition of modern liberal democracy more generally—is indeed constituted by a great debate between a progressive liberalism and a conservative liberalism. We should therefore be skeptical of the progressive creed with roots in Paine if only because its dream of removing the politics from politics and of reducing government to rational administration denies that the great debate is a worthy debate. In its tendency to absolutize its own claims and dismiss without consideration alternative claims, progressive liberalism reveals an illiberal streak. In contrast, Burke’s conservative liberalism recognizes the limits of reason in morals and politics; the unceasing play of passion, interest, and imagination in human life; and the constant need to balance competing interests and contending principles. The harmonizing imperative that grows out of Burke’s conservative liberalism is open to the arguments of Paine, and therefore is in a decisive sense more in keeping with the spirit of freedom.

This is not to say the Burkean perspective is without difficulties. One weakness with which Levin does not wrestle is the profound difference between the circumstances in which Burke wrote and those we confront. Burke, for example, could insist that care for the needy should remain a private function in part because of the limits of government and in part because of the relative vibrancy of family and faith in late-eighteenth-century Britain. But over the last two hundred years family, faith, and the structure of civil society have undergone profound changes. In twenty-first-century America, the problem is as much *restoring* family, faith, and civil society as it is *preserving* them. Because of the breakdown of the family, the decline of faith, and the hollowing out of civil society in our post-industrial age, a Burkean devotion to liberty and prudent respect for circumstances counsels that government—without losing sight of, or undermining by foolish policy, limited government and the virtues of individual freedom—must incorporate lessons from the progressive liberalism of Paine by assuming a fair share of responsibility for those elderly, young, and poor who are incapable of caring for themselves without additional assistance.

To achieve the right balance, we will need two healthy parties and we will need conservative liberalism to explain the place of partisan contestation in a liberal democracy.

But we will also need something more.

Perhaps the leading benefit of studying the great debate between Burke's conservative liberalism and Paine's progressive liberalism is that it brings into focus the need for reinvigorating the beliefs, practices, and associations on which liberty depends—the need, in short, for a restorative liberalism.

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