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## A House Divided: The Structure of Political Polarization Analyzed

Jeffrey Dudiak<sup>1</sup>

I would like to offer a brief analysis of our current entanglements in the lure of political polarization, a societal pull to which we are, most all of us anyway, not only susceptible, but perhaps necessarily victims, and for which I am offering “wisdom” as precisely the antidote. That is, as I describe political polarization in what follows, I ask that you consider just how antithetical to wisdom its forces are, and how wisdom, or at least the beginning of wisdom, might open up an alternative to the “forced choice,” “antithetical,” “polemical” politics that currently divide us hopelessly against one another, and that mitigate against any possibility of social harmony, not to mention the gospel command for neighbour love—which, as we know, means loving our enemy.

My thesis, then, is that polarization is not only disagreement, and not even strong disagreement. We have always had disagreements, and vigorous oppositions, even divisions, but we have not always had polarization. Rather—or at least this is my intuition—polarization is a particular way of disagreeing, a particular way of structuring our disagreements, a particular way of construing and exacerbating our differences. Or, precisely, polarization is a way of disagreeing where the disagreement itself is the defining feature of the positions taken by the parties on both sides of the issue. That is, under the regime of polarization, I define myself not principally by what I am, in terms of my positive attributes and positions, but I define myself negatively, over against what I am not, and what I am opposed to. So under the sway of polarization, to be conservative is not simply a matter of espousing a certain set of beliefs about how best to structure society, it is—as constituent of those beliefs—to be actively opposed to liberal policies, such that “owning the libs” becomes central to what being a conservative means. To be an atheist is not only not to believe in God, but to actively oppose belief in God, as the work of the “new atheists” graphically illustrates. To be a feminist under polarization is not only to promote the cause of women, but to see as part and parcel of that project an opposition to masculinity. The same being true of the opposite “side” on each of these issues, or any issue.

So psychologically, when what I am, when my very identity, includes the rejection of what I take to be opposed to me, that which is opposed to me becomes not only something

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Dudiak is Professor of Philosophy, The King’s University, Edmonton. Author’s note: This essay is an excerpt from a larger project entitled *Of Serpents and Doves: Explorations in Christian Wisdom*. A recording of the lecture from which this section is taken can be found at <https://www.kingsu.ca/about-us/calendar/quandaries/previous-lectures> under the title “Who is my neighbour?” My thesis is that in modernity the desire for wisdom was eclipsed by the pursuit of knowledge, a problem exacerbated in the postmodern world with the eclipse of knowledge by information. If, as I argue, our times demand, above all, that we attend carefully to the call of wisdom, we may first need to re-acquaint ourselves with what wisdom is. I suggest that wisdom is the capacity to take critical distance from ourselves, from our instincts, our desires, our beliefs, and even our deepest convictions (including taking distance from this “taking distance” itself—which is what distinguishes wisdom from skepticism). We must hold our convictions, yes, even passionately, yet not blindly, but with “fear and trembling” (which is what distinguishes wisdom from ideology). In the following excerpt, our current “forced complicity” in political polarization—which I take to be ruinous of the social fabric—is presented as excluding wisdom by its very structure, and therefore invites us to wisdom as its antidote.

with which I disagree, but, far more dramatically, a threat to my very identity. I am “not that,” where “that” becomes a threat to who I am. And as with any threat, my reflex becomes one of either flight or fight—and often each in turn. Politically, we construct a group identity defined at least as much by what we collectively oppose as by what we collectively affirm. We band together with others of our tribe, unified in our opposition to our others, those who belong to the other tribe. Since our collective identity is at stake, the very presence of those on the other side is, as it is often described, an existential threat; we cannot be who we are as a people so long as those on the other side, who have a very different sense of who we are, and who are thus traitors to who we really are, menace our sense of identity. And since constitutive of who we are essentially includes this very opposition, the threat menaces, as it were, from the inside; our fear of the other is built into who we are, into our very sense of ourselves. So, paradoxically, we need the other over against whom we define ourselves in order to be who we are, but in order to be who we are the threat of the other must be eliminated. My identity rests on both the presence and the destruction of the other. This tension, I suspect, lies behind much of the passion that animates polarized discourse. It is “fear” and “hate,” and not the aspiration to success, that ultimately drives this dynamic.

This built-in existential threat, this fear-based dynamic, has the effect of driving those on both sides to the extremes. If the perceived threat comes from the other side, my feeling of security and of rightness, our feeling of security and rightness, comes from taking as much distance as possible from the other side. There is established, then, a pressure towards the poles, which has a number of implications.

First of all, in a polarized environment, all of the rewards, and all of the accolades, go to those who are the most extreme in their convictions, those most committed to the noble cause, leading to radicalization. Nothing is more satisfying than accusing someone less radical than oneself of precisely what “we” are accusing those on the other side of advocating. Out-liberalizing the liberals, or out-conservativizing the conservatives, being more and more pure, more and more “woke,” more and more enthralled to the cause, more and more extreme, becomes a badge of honour, and increasingly the prerequisite for (if not political, then at least intellectual and spiritual) leadership. True enough, one might hold one’s nose and support a “moderate” if that’s what it takes to block those on the other side from imposing their pernicious agenda (which cause, remember, is central to “our” agenda), but only with regret. Radicalization is a natural effect of polarization.

A second, related consequence is that under the effects of polarization it becomes increasingly difficult to steer anything like a middle course politically. As with the effects of the north-south poles of a magnet, from which the metaphor is drawn, under polarization the entire political field is, as it were, magnetically charged. Even those who would hope to steer some middle course have to define their positions over against the extremes, and find themselves, even against their wishes, inclined inexorably to one side or the other. Among the politically committed, because all of the pressure is toward the extremes, anything giving off even the mildest scent of compromise is perceived as a betrayal. If you are not entirely with us, even if you are hesitant about being sucked all the way down the rabbit hole, you are against us. Pick a side! Those who refuse to be drawn into this field-defining pressure toward the poles, on one side or the other, are simply left out of the political process, and when they go to cast their votes they are most often forced to choose among the options presented by those at the poles who now dominate the political landscape.

Thirdly, with the other side being precisely a threat, it becomes almost impossible to enter into anything like meaningful dialogue with them, which cannot but be perceived as dealing with the Devil. On almost every issue, the very fact that the other side is for something is enough for us to be against it. The issues themselves get framed, consistent with the phenomenon of polarization, as simple binaries, as “either-or,” forced choices: either the rights of the woman or the rights of the fetus; either free enterprise or socialism; either there are two, biologically grounded genders, or else gender is anything we want it to be. There can be, and is, much nuance and sophistication in the arguments for one side or the other, but little or no nuance in negotiating any understanding across these “either-or”s. The word *dialectical* comes from two Greek words: the preposition *dia* meaning “through,” and *legein* meaning “to speak.” To be in a dialectical relationship means that there is a back and forth, a mutual informing between the terms in relationship, a need for each other if a fuller understanding is to be achieved. Polarization replaces the healthy and humble dialectical relationship with a dichotomy, which derives from the Greek *dikho* meaning “in two, apart.” Listening and learning, hearing where those on the other side are coming from and acknowledging the legitimacy of their perspectives, derived from their deep concerns, is excluded.

Fourthly, under polarization, not only the positions but the people on the other side are maligned and dismissed. I establish my bona fides within my tribe by joining in the hymn that declares those on the other side are delusional at best, probably stupid, certainly immoral, and in the case of the leaders on the other side, unquestionably criminal. Those on each side choose the worst examples of the other to caricature the whole of their opposition: according to those on the right, everyone on the left is a socialist hippy intent on taking everything from those who earned it and giving it those who didn't; according to those on the left, everyone on the right is a privileged, racist homophobe. Name calling abounds. Eye-rolling sarcasm, imperious derision, self-righteous incredulity, all aimed at “them,” characterizes the discourse with respect to the other on both sides, no less amongst the supposedly more sophisticated commentators, culminating in vindictive yearning on both sides to see the leaders of the other side locked up. The threat, that is, comes not only from the positions that those who oppose us hold, but from those who hold them.

Important here, and central to the whole dynamic, is to recognize that under polarization we no longer view those who oppose us as sharing our fundamental aspirations but advocating for an alternative strategy in attaining them, but rather as aspiring to something essentially antithetical to that at which we aim—resulting in two entirely incompatible visions of how things should be. Not only antagonistic, this political dynamic demands, rather, a fight to the death, the obliteration of the opposition; those on the other side need to be silenced—by mockery, by legislation, by getting them fired from their jobs, by getting them incarcerated. Polarization entails that we are no longer in the realm of us *and* them, but of us *or* them.

A fifth consequence of this dynamic is that, because polarization is consolidated across opposition and fear, those on both sides need to feel, and do feel, that they are the oppressed minority, fighting a noble but uphill battle against those on the other side who are the blind but prevailing majority. Those on the left see themselves as fighting constantly against an intransigent inertia, against the dead weight of traditional but oppressive culture, whereas those on the right see almost all of the legislative momentum (not to mention all of the coercion of political correctness) as the dominant cultural trajectory, contrary to their

priorities. The passion and anger required to support and enforce polarization requires that those on both sides feel that they are losing, that those on both sides feel that they are the victims. The truth, I suspect, is that the internal dynamics of polarization create a situation where a population is more or less evenly divided, and that the real power belongs, not with one side or the other, but to the system itself, to the push and pull between the poles, a system that draws all of us in and distributes us to one side or the other, which only serves to reinforce it, something that our politicians (on both sides) have become masters of exploiting.

Finally, one of the most fascinating aspects of polarization, one of the ways in which each side consolidates and insulates itself against objections, is the denial, on both sides, of everyday experience, of commonsense reality. So, on the right there is the constant refrain that mainstream media (which it derisively refers to as the “lame-stream media”), which controls the masses, is an organ of manipulation governed by liberal forces, such that no commonsense observation is above suspicion, and nothing that has not been refracted through the lens of paranoia can be trusted. The conspiracy theories consequent to such a proposition are, of course, madness. But on the left there is a parallel story, that our everyday experience—deeply embedded in Western culture and thus skewed by patriarchy and racism and heteronormativity—cannot be trusted, the real truth being the provenance of the specialized knowledge of professors in social science departments, revealed only across critical race theory and its parallels in gender studies, etc., which—we discover, as we are lured further and further out upon the branch—are either individually, or collectively (across “intersectionality”), the explanation for everything. In neither case can I trust my own experience, or the everyday experiences of anyone else (those members of oppressed groups sometimes exempted), nor can we trust anything that comes to us through our already established and previously trusted institutions (including the university, science, government, the church)—because, on the accounts of both the left and the right, the surface phenomena are a lie, and the truth lies in subterranean forces requiring some kind of esoteric access—which we who are in the know perceive and accept, and the other side, the blind majority, denies. And so institutions, upon which we depend to provide us with social stability, and that we need to mediate our political differences, and to critically evaluate them, are distrusted on both sides, removing the ballast that once kept the cultural ship from tipping dangerously from port to starboard, and starboard to port, in what has become a vertiginous political voyage without any agreed-upon destination.

Of course, there is some real and important truth on both sides here: the media cannot but be influenced by the corporate forces that keep it alive, and racism and sexism and heteronormativity are real things. But when we take a discourse, any discourse, as absolute, totalize it as the explanation for everything (rather than acknowledge that everything affects everything, which I suspect is the case), and forget that while every discourse gives us an explanation of things, each finite perspective needs to be contextualized and tested in dialogue with other partial discourses, we have eclipsed wisdom by overestimating the reach of our legitimate but limited knowledge. And at the same time we undermine the very institutions necessary to sustain the insights gained.

This all seems to me about as far as east is from west from the sage query qua admonition of Jesus in Matthew 7:3: “Why do you focus on the speck in your brother’s eye, and not consider the log in your own?” This is, perhaps—even while the text does not

mention the word—the most important solicitation to wisdom in the Christian testament, applicable, I think, even to those who do not share that faith.