

“A Hopeful Memoir of the ‘Baldwin/Buckley Debate’ in 1965, in Cambridge, England”

“Un recuerdo esperanzador del ‘Debate Baldwin/Buckley’ en Cambridge, Inglaterra en 1965”



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Abstract

The author recounts his experience of the debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. in 1965, in Cambridge, England. The debate, which has become “infamous” in the history of American conservative political thought and in the history of race relations, was characterised by unconscious mirroring and othering in connection with intersectionality and processes of prejudice and discrimination associated with it. The author also summarises some of his subsequent work on the topic of mature hope.

Key words

Mirroring, othering, the Baldwin/Buckley Debate, intersectionality and racism, mature hope

Resumen

“El autor relata su experiencia del debate entre James Baldwin y William F. Buckley Jr. en 1965, en Cambridge, Inglaterra. El debate, que se ha hecho “tristemente célebre” en la historia del pensamiento político conservador estadounidense y en la historia de las relaciones raciales, se caracterizó por el reflejo inconsciente y la alterización en relación con la interseccionalidad y los procesos de prejuicio y discriminación asociados a ella. El autor también resume algunos de sus trabajos posteriores sobre el tema de la esperanza madura.

Palabras clave

Espejismo, alteridad, el debate Baldwin/Buckley, interseccionalidad y racismo, esperanza madura

In this personal memoir I will outline some of the processes that characterised a formal debate in 1965, in Cambridge, England between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. The full debate can be seen on YouTube (Aeon Video, 2019). For those readers who do not know these iconic figures and their work, which during the last few years has experienced a renaissance in the United States and in England, Baldwin might be described briefly – if not cryptically – as a Black-American novelist, and Buckley as an intellectual leader – if not the Father – of the post-World War II conservative movement in the United States. Baldwin was very important for Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, and Buckley for Ronald Reagan, who had not yet become politically prominent, at least not at a national level. Many of Baldwin’s ideas about socio-cultural “mirroring” and “othering” stemmed from the work of Lacan (1966), which he is likely to have absorbed during his years in Paris after World War II. Many of Buckley’s ideas about natural justice and social justice were absorbed during his years as a student at Yale University in New Haven, and subsequently in Manhattan, prior to the Civil Rights Movement and the War in Vietnam. I will also review some of my thoughts about mature hope in the context of political struggle that requires personal and collective engagement with success as well as failure.

The debate featured in Raoul Peck’s (2016) documentary “I Am Not Your Negro”. In his widely acclaimed *The Fire is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America*, Nicholas Buccola (2019) described this debate as “famous”. The debate and book are important source material for a film about the history of conservative political thought in the United States, the varieties of which range from the ideas of the Alternative Right to the ideas of those who profess to seek a degree of continuity and stability. The film was directed by Barak Goodman, and produced by Ark for American Masters. The debate has recently been staged in “Debate: Baldwin

vs Buckley” (Stone Nest, 2023) in the United States and in England.

As it happens, I was a member of the audience at this debate, and I spoke from the floor. I had forgotten about this event until I was contacted by Buccola in order to discuss my experience of it and my memory of what Cambridge was like at the time. Subsequently, I was contacted by Goodman in order to discuss various aspects of the debate, in particular how the mostly undergraduate audience responded to Buckley in the context of race relations during the 1960’s.

Although Cambridge University was of global importance, especially in fields such as molecular biology, astronomy, and economics, it had come to be regarded as increasingly peripheral to the centres of academic power in Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, at least from the point of view of the power elite of America, who nonetheless, at least in my opinion, continued to genuflect towards the British “Academy”. Nevertheless, the news of many world affairs had reached the high tables of the Fellows of most Cambridge Colleges. For example, we knew that President Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963, as was Lee Harvey Oswald, who in turn, was killed by Jack Ruby. The War in Vietnam had picked up pace. It was clear that the American military was comprised disproportionately of “Negroes”, most of whom had been educated in systems of education that were defined as “separate but equal”. (“Negro” was regarded as the most-polite and politically correct term of reference; the other “n-words” were regarded as vulgar – if not yet politically incorrect; and “African-American” was rarely used).

1.

The motion of the debate was “The American dream had been at the expense of the American Negro”. The debate was conducted in the traditional style of the Cambridge Union. Baldwin proposed the motion. His argument was based on his *The Fire Next Time*, which had just been published in England. He made the following points:

- The economic development of the United States depended on the availability of comparatively inexpensive land, minerals, and labour. The system of slavery was nothing if not a long-term source of cheap labour.
- This economic development also depended on extensive immigration from various peoples around the world who were seeking freedom and the opportunity to make a better life for themselves. However, they too were a source of cheap labour.
- The cohesion of this heterogenous nation depended on the existence of Black slaves and

Brown indigenous Indians who were not only an “under-class” in economic and political terms, but also an institutionalised “Other” who had become a container for the projections of many unwanted personal and socio-cultural characteristics.

- Such projections and their inevitable introjections deprived these slaves and indigenous people from realising their potentials, and, hence, from contributing to the common good, but also deprived the White colonialists and more recent immigrants from the full knowledge and realisation of their own strengths and potentials. These processes were based on mirroring and othering, which were not only interpersonal but also social-systemic.
- The continuing development of the nation and its citizens depends on a process of healing and making whole, not only in terms of economic development, but also in terms of political, cultural, and even psychological development, this last being a matter of accepting flaws and imperfections in those who we love, the capacity for sexual and sensual pleasure, and for being able to have various forms of intellectual and emotional sublimations.
- Such healing requires an acknowledgement of the existence of systemic mirroring and othering, both benign and malignant. It also requires an appreciation of the depth of suffering and anger, on the one hand, and the extent of arrogance and grandiosity, on the other.
- It is absolutely necessary to realise that the descendants of slaves could not and would not be deprived of hope for very much longer. If major changes were not soon forthcoming, the White Establishment would face the fire next time!

2.

In rebuttal, Buckley made the following points:

- Your argument about the economic development of the United States may have several elements of truth in it, but is much too simple.
- The American Negro has been free for almost a hundred years. (Actually, the American Emancipation Proclamation was signed into Law in 1865).
- The American Negro has been given the right to dream the American dream, and has been given the same opportunities that other people have been given.
- However, the American Negro has failed to realise this dream, not because he was blocked from doing so, but because he was unable to utilise what was and is available to him, mainly because his lesser intelligence, moral and other values, and natural and innate laziness, lethargy, and dependency

have meant that like a child he has really needed to be looked after.

3.

As seen in the video of the debate, which I had no idea was being made, a young man in the audience stood up and remained standing, in effect demanding to be recognised and to be given a voice. I was that man. I had begun to feel that based on his implicit comparisons of the American Negro to the British working class, Buckley would win the debate.

As a modern sociologist I knew the texts to which Buckley referred. Although his summaries of them sounded convincing, in fact they were based on outmoded English theories of genetically transmitted inequalities born of animal husbandry and of the statistical study of eugenics. Moreover, some of his innatist arguments were based on misreading these texts. In fact, the American Negro was blocked from using the accepted means for achieving the goals of the American dream, often legally, but even more often informally. In any case, his inability – if not his refusal – to use the accepted means was a function of centuries of slavery and the separation from his original cultures and societies, involving the myriad consequences of social trauma, including the introjections of projections of contempt and inferiority. This was entirely analogous to the widely accepted belief that the children of manual workers in England were unable and unwilling to make use of the educational and occupational opportunities which the Establishment had so generously made available to them. It was so hard for the Establishment to understand that many children from working-class backgrounds who had no books in their homes and no sense of themselves as being able and entitled to surpass their fathers in economic and social terms, would not be able to perform well on achievement tests at eleven years of age, or to impress a middle-class adult in an interview. The members of the largely middle-class audience were not sympathetic to members of the working class.

Buckley had also slid over a very simple fact: democracy absolutely depends on two pillars: 1) all citizens of a certain age must be able to vote without fear of the consequences of this; and 2) an optimal set of checks and balances concerning the consequences of populism must exist. In other words, when assessing the validity of the dream of any nation, the realities of power relations had to be taken into account.

4.

To me, Baldwin came across as authentic, speaking from both the brain and the heart. However, he also came across as the ultimate “marginal man” with respect to

all the elements of intersectionality, i.e. of class, race, and gender, to which I would add a kind of rootlessness. As Baldwin often acknowledged, he had lived abroad in order to escape the racism and homophobia of American life. However, in so doing, he had become a Europeanised American, which was a very particular social category in the context of Europe as well as America, a social category with a very long history in both literature and political life. He was accused by Buckley of speaking in a newly acquired accent of an English gentleman, perhaps in readiness for his visit to Cambridge. He was neither a sociologist nor a journalist, but an “intellectual” and “cultural critic”. He used the syntax of an orator/preacher, poet, and novelist. His language was lyrical and “sexualised”. Somewhat anxious in his demeanour, he was seductive, wanting to be loved and accepted.

In contrast to Baldwin, Buckley seemed to be totally at ease in the hallowed hall of the Cambridge Student Union. However, he had highly performative mannerisms, and seemed to be trying to sound less American and more English, of which he had accused Baldwin. In fact, his own accent was a somewhat confused amalgam of Texas, Connecticut, and New York. After all, he was from a Southern Catholic family of new money, clearly having struggled with “status incongruence” (Hopper, 1981). In his apparent denial and disavowal of so much about himself and his family background, he came across as a version of the kind of White man of post-war America who Baldwin had warned of “the fire next time”.

Baldwin dressed informally, more or less like a Cambridge don. Buckley dressed formally, in the traditional black and white of the dinner jacket, black tie and of course white shirt. Baldwin had large and protruding eyes, the “whites” of which were very pronounced. They contrasted dramatically with the colour of his skin. Buckley appeared to have Northern European ancestry. Although he was not what was later to be called a “WASP”, he was entirely wispish in his self-presentation.

I remember thinking that Baldwin and Buckley appeared to be so very different from each other. One was black, and the other white. No other colours were relevant.

Buckley’s rebuttal of Baldwin’s argument was a perfect example of holding up what Aiyegbusi (2021, 2023) has called a “white mirror”, one in which the “other” in the mirror asserts that in racial terms the viewer does not perceive the other accurately. This white mirror could also be called a “Christian mirror” or whatever element of prejudice and discrimination is of primary concern. In any case, Buckley neither could nor would recognise Baldwin’s perceptions of their interpersonal realities.

I also felt that Baldwin was hurt by Buckley's assertions.

5.

I would like to say a bit about myself as a witness of this debate, or at least about how I remember myself. In St Louis, where I was born and raised, I was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. During the late 1950's, I was the Chairman of the Student Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) at Washington University. At the time this was a fairly radical and militant organisation, although a few years later it was regarded as a movement of "Uncle Toms". In 1961, Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Chapel of the University. After the speech, The Committee of the NAACP was invited to have coffee with King, his entourage and other university dignitaries. I still remember shaking hands with Dr King.

I also remember that around this time I had a discussion about race relations with one of my family's Negro maids who I loved and who I know loved me and my brothers. For most of her life she believed that she would find freedom and happiness in heaven. However, she was no longer certain that she either could or would be able to wait.

In August 1962, my wife and I and our baby daughter in a stroller were members of a protest against a bowling alley that refused to admit Negroes. The next day our picture was in a newspaper along with an article about the "disruptive" protest.

A few weeks later, we left for Leicester, England where I had been appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in Sociology at the University of Leicester. A year later, we moved to Cambridge. I had developed a special interest in the study of education and social stratification, the sociology of economic life, and in the sociology of mental illness.

Going back to the Debate, I felt that no matter how academically successful I might have been, I was still an outsider: an American in England, a Jew in a Christian society, and a loner among people who seemed to know one another fairly well. I was a Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Baldwin and Buckley were also outsiders, but I identified more fully with Baldwin.

6.

Whilst standing and demanding to be recognised and allowed to speak, all sorts of images came to my mind, mainly from 19th Century paintings in Washington, DC of Abraham Lincoln or some such figure standing up in the Senate and pointing a finger at his opponent in the

conviction that although the Establishment was not at his side, truth and freedom would prevail. I felt compelled to enact what I realised only later in my life were my own "rescue fantasies". In fact, I was so anxious that I thought I might faint.

Although I was preparing myself to give a lecture about "effective intelligence", by the time I was recognised, Buckley had just asked a series of rhetorical questions to the effect of "What can we do about the American Negro?" and even "What can we do about *our* American Negroes?" Thinking that I had been recognised, I raised my right hand and pointed to Buckley: "Sir", I interrupted, "I will tell you what you can do about the American Negro: you can give him the vote in Mississippi".

The audience applauded. Buckley was visibly thrown off balance. He replied that it was not very important for more Negroes to vote in Mississippi. It was much more important for fewer White people to do so. At that moment in his rebuttal of the motion of the debate, Buckley, whether or not he was a racist, was perceived to be a kind of White male elitist who was against democratic process. Clearly, he was not a "meritocrat". Buckley had failed to understand that the English were both elitist and democratic. Subsequently, it was widely acknowledged that my interjection had been a turning point in the debate. Baldwin won with a handsome majority.

II- What Buckley should have said to Baldwin and to the audience

Given our understanding of mirroring and of othering, even then, what should Buckley have said to Baldwin? I would suggest something like the following: "Mr Baldwin, I see you and I hear you. I have absorbed your pains and sorrows. I recognise part of you as part of me, and I recognise part of me as part of you. I also recognise your concerns. Of course, it is true that slavery and its long-term consequences have been denied and disavowed, and many of the beliefs on which it was based still prevail. However, this is contrary to the American belief that all men are created equal before God and the Law, and that they should have equal rights to realise their potentials. The American dream was not and is not only about economic development. It is also about human development. You and I are each part of the American dream. We must work together to realise the American dream. Working together is actually part of the American dream. The colour of our skin is irrelevant. So, too, is our sex and our gender. Only together can we establish new beginnings and new possibilities. We have each been dehumanised by our projections and our introjections.

We each need to acknowledge this and to engage with it fully. Nonetheless, as is the case in all nations, social dreams are social aspirations. We will always fail our dreams. As Beckett once said, “Ever tried, ever failed, no matter, try again, fail again, fail better”. In fact, we have made and will continue to make progress, which is precisely why we are in pain and will inevitably continue to be in pain”. I believe that such a statement would have been correct morally as well as sociologically and politically. And if Buckley had been able to rise to the occasion, he would have also won the debate.

III – Subsequently...

A few days after the debate, Medgar Evers was murdered in Mississippi. Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were soon to be assassinated. A few months later, I was in Los Angeles and San Francisco giving lectures and seminars about social stratification, social mobility, and education. While flying into LAX, the pilot announced that if we looked out the window, we would see plumes of smoke rising from an increasingly widespread fire. This was the start of the Watts Riots and of a new phase of race relations in the United States (Wikipedia Notes, 1965). I wondered if this was an indication that Baldwin’s prophecy had come true. Many other people wondered the same.

During the subsequent decades many more hopeful developments have occurred, ranging from greater educational and employment opportunities for Black Americans, especially in the media and in the professions, including those in medicine and the mental health fields in general.

I retrained as a psychotherapist, group analyst, and eventually as a psychoanalyst. I began to explore the topic of hope both in clinical work and in society and culture more generally. Distinguishing theological hope from secular hope, and infantile, pie-in-the-sky hope

from more mature realistic hope, I (Hopper, 1998/2003) argued that we might usefully define hope as the ability and willingness to exercise the transcendent imagination. “...(I)nterdependence requires authentic dialogue among people and groups who represent and convey the disavowed and missing parts and qualities of one another. ... (A) renewed sense of completeness depends both on authentic dialogue across the generations and across the boundaries that define self and other, both personally and individually, and with respect to social groups, for example, those of stratification, ethnicity, and gender” (Hopper, 2005, p. xvii). The cohesion of the self and the cohesion of the group depend on the successful negotiation – if not the full resolution – of the conflicts between processes of “illusion-ment” and “disillusion-ment”. Mature hope is born in this dialectical struggle.

For a presentation to the Israeli Institute of Group Analysis, I (Hopper, 2015) wrote that all human relations exist on a canvas of mother’s mind and mother’s body, marked by hotspots of love and desire as well as by those of rivalry and hate. The personal mother must be located within a wider context of the environmental mother. Competition for the control of the maternal cornucopia of scarce resources, including compassion itself, is inherent in the human condition. As acknowledged by several Israeli novelists, the mind and body of the mother is easily confused with the land itself.

Today, I (Hopper, 2022) would add that in attempting to realise our mature hopes, it is essential to relinquish the desire for retaliation and revenge, which are the main elements of the Monte Cristo Complex, which so often follows the injustices of social trauma and scapegoating. However, this requires the painful experience of remorse, restoration and restitution. We will always experience the pride of ascent and the shame of descent. The road to “Jerusalem” will always be uphill.

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