

## Resisting Binaries: The Case for Political Complexities

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I'm going to make the case that we should be cautious when political issues come packaged for us as simple binaries: right-vs.left, us-vs-them, east-vs-west, these kinds of arguments, are something we're hearing a lot of in the current campaign season and something we hear perennially in discussions about international affairs. For a variety of reasons, which I will discuss, such simplistic descriptions are limiting, potentially harmful, and frankly a bit boring. We can do better. The good news is, if we put in a bit of effort to move past these simplistic categories, the intellectual spaces available to us for understanding politics are vast and vibrant. This may be welcome news at a time where we might be feeling a bit claustrophobic when it comes to politics.

The way we are getting our information these days is hardening our tendencies towards simplified categories. According to the Pew Research Center, cable news received a 7% increase in viewership in 2015. In an average 24-hour cycle, 1.9 million people are watching cable news in the United States. MSNBC had 352,000 viewers; CNN 490,000; and Fox News had more than both of them combined at 1.1 million. Fox led in revenue; the network was projected to increase income to \$2.3 billion in 2016.

Despite its popularity, I'm going to offer a particular critique of cable news of all sorts – Fox, MSNBC, whichever because their collective business models are largely similar, and often rely on binaries to present information. Many of the channels are founded on leaning either right or left, or structure programs to present one side against another, usually conservative vs. liberal to frame and explain the news.

This approach too-readily leads to an idea that these categories are an exclusive way of comprehending the world. As if you can't understand politics except in terms of partisanship, for example, which to me as a political scientist seems preposterously limiting analytically. There are many expansive factors, economic, social, cultural and political, that shape power and our place in the world. The idea that the world is understood in two sided terms is not only unnecessarily narrow but it is frankly boring after awhile. Each of us in our lives encounters a 3-dimensional political world, just two sides of anything fundamentally fails to describe the spectrum of our experiences, values and interests. You feel some ways about certain issues, other ways about other issues and have multiple, layered identities.

Additionally, emphasizing binaries has consequences. I will offer quotes from two prominent figures, the first comes from Reince Priebus, current

Chairman of the Republican Party: “Division is profit in the world of cable news. If you’re dividing, you’re making money... There is no money in unity. It is a profit center to divide people, to divide politics, to divide parties. And that's what you see on television.”

John Stewart said something similar, “My problem is, it’s become tribal... And if you have 24-hour networks that ... highlight the conflict between two sides.... they’ve delegitimized the idea of editorial authority while exercising *incredible* editorial authority, which is its amazing,”

To help unpack that last comment by Stewart, the idea that bias, or editorial commentary is removed by presenting right and left equally as balancing forces is absurd, when bias is introduced time and again just by framing the debate in those terms.

Both Priebus and Stewart are alluding to how the binaries used so often by cable news are not only simple; they are simplistic, meaning there is a cost to this approach for all of us. Trusting exclusive categories is not only harmful to the process of understanding politics; over time it reinforces divisions, and inspires behavior that are more likely to make these groups harden and materialize.

I have seen the potential harm of clinging to categories first hand in teaching Islam and politics here at Bowdoin. Many conceptualize Islam as the East, in metaphorical, political and geographic opposition to the West, which for most Americans means liberalism, democracy, western Europe and the U.S.

This East-vs-West binary aggressively ignores the multitude of spaces – political, social, economic and geographic – where these categories of East as Islam and West as liberal democracy, don’t make much sense, and artificially narrow important intellectual and political spaces. Consider, for example, that the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia is a democracy. There are also, for example, increasingly vocal Islamic Feminist movements championing gender equality and human rights not by rejecting Islamic traditions but by embracing and promoting Quranic principles of justice. In a simple us vs. them East and West narrative, what space is provided for the 3.3 million American Muslims? And the 12+ million Arab Christians across the Middle East, where do they go? Where does Turkey belong in this binary? And in this East/West divide how is it that Saudi Arabia is involved in violent proxy wars against Iran right now, including an increasingly violent rivalry ripping Yemen apart, yet Saudi remains one of America’s oldest allies, economic and political partners for over 70 years – that alliance between Saudi and the U.S. predates the founding of the state of Israel by the way. Furthermore, as several scholars have painstakingly documented, popular

Western concepts about the East tend to say as much about the observer as the subject being observed.

Indeed, East as Islam and West as the U.S. are entities not nearly as separate as a binary would suggest – instead they are often intimately historically intertwined inside a collective narrative. The current leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, for example, began to violently oppose the United States following the 2004 U.S. bombing of Samarra, Iraq where al-Baghdadi was born. (Gerges 2016: 132). At first a low-level foot soldier, he was unknown and unremarkable. That is, until he was imprisoned in a U.S.-run detention facility in Iraq during the war. Far from serving as an institution of reform and de-radicalization, these U.S. prisons have been described as “al Qaeda schools”– bringing those inclined to fight the U.S. together in a safe space – protected by wire and concrete from the violence of the war –a perfect and regrettable institution for harboring, indoctrinating and enlisting increasingly radical anti-U.S. insurgents. (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 118; Gerges 2016: 133) In the American prison al-Baghdadi gained a reputation among U.S. guards as a problem-solver, since he demonstrated talent mediating disagreements among inmates. U.S. administrators found this useful and let him venture between different blocs of the prison, thus enabling al-Baghdadi to cultivate enormous credibility and an expansive network that he would use later to build the Islamic State. (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 119) As Fawas Gerges notes in his account of the rise of ISIS, “In a very real sense, ISIS’s command-and-control tier emerged with ‘made-in-the-US-run prisons’ tags.” (Gerges 2016: 133)

How separate are the East and West in this history? Without the U.S. invasion in 2003 there would be not have been an insurgency pinning the U.S. in Iraq, and without the insurgency the Americans would not have bombed Samarra or operated those prisons holding detainees like al-Baghdadi. Furthermore, without American prisons, the insurgency in Iraq would not have been so networked, the die cast for the rise of ISIS under al-Baghdadi’s vision – all in all a ghastly and macabre symbiosis that does not describe separate worlds, but one intimate geographic and political ecosystem that is neither East nor West, but a real place in Iraq during the American war. Concrete rooms built block by block by U.S. Army Engineers containing the men and ideas that would create the Islamic State.

While I imagine you’ve noticed various American pundits and politicians occasionally using, or alluding to us vs. them arguments in terms of Islam and the West, please note that this binary is certainly not limited to American politics. The Islamic State itself, for example, is an enormous proponent of this East-vs.West binary. ISIS has issued glossy magazines, celebrating what they call “the extinction of the greyzone,” by this they mean

the squashing of moderate spaces between the binary of us and them. They insist on this East/West binary to make the absurd claim that they, ISIS, represent and defend Sunni Islam. One of the main recruiting tools for ISIS according to the International Centre for Counterterrorism, is this binary and “the perception that the West has placed Islam under siege helps to mobilize and rally IS supporters.” In other words, arguments that cast the West against Islam in binary opposition and proclaim that all Muslims are threats –unintentionally or not – are likely to help ISIS – by surrendering to the Islamic State undue and undeserved political legitimacy as a representative of Islam. On the other hand the vast greyzone between East and West binaries can instead offer the West as a safehaven for Muslims, not a threat, denying the Islamic State its propaganda.

Note that terrorist attacks targeting the West are meant to drive communities into one or the other binary category against each other – because this East/West war is a necessary narrative for the Islamic State to continue to recruit members and justify its murderous existence. In effect, embracing the greyzone between binaries is strategically vital, as the best enduring policy solutions to thwart terrorism are almost certainly embedded in political intricacies.

Note that this plea to embrace space, complexity and the unknown as a source of wisdom is a very old idea. When the Oracle of Delphi proclaimed that Socrates was the wisest man in Athens, the title was deeply unsettling for Socrates, and he sought to prove the Oracle wrong. He searched for someone who was smarter – who could identify the most important components of life. But everyone Socrates approached was either a pretentious windbag, or intolerably superficial, offering some easy answer likely because they were too embarrassed to admit what they didn’t know. It led Socrates to wonder if perhaps the Oracle was right because at least he could embrace his ignorance, the limits of earthly knowledge, and the spaces in between simple, faked answers. Socrates concluded that he knew nothing, just like everyone else, but he welcomed this fact, and the curiosity and space such an admission creates. He said: “I am wiser than this human being. For probably neither of us knows anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I am likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know.” (Plato’s Apology of Socrates)

Being an amateur, a beginner, someone who does not know, but does not fake it, is something to be embraced, not shunned. It is uncomfortable, but it is a noble endeavor to create space for potential. Edward Said, the Palestinian-American intellectual noted that amateurism is “the desire to be moved not

by profit or reward, but by love for an unquenchable interest in the larger picture.” In other words amateurism is the quintessential essence of intellectual enterprise – the process of discarding false categories or easy answers and to head off into the open unknown.

This concept is of course intimately related to the endeavor of your liberal arts education. You are encouraged to claim expansive intellectual space, challenging messages from the outside world that are sometimes very loud and insist upon simplistic categories. But you do not have to accept nor adopt these perspectives as your own. The grey spaces in between binaries, I am happy to report are alive and well in all of us that are curious and patient enough to be amateurs – either earnest beginners bravely traversing new terrain, or specialists, those of us who have dedicated our lives to dissecting intricacies - cataloging connections and layers of grey embedded in complex subjects.

So while we are more or less limited to two choices in the upcoming election, your larger quest to understanding power and politics does not need to accept this-or-that types of narratives. It is possible, for example, to think about a controversial subject like political Islam without wanting it fit into a certain category. I hear all the time Islam is a religion of peace, or a religion of violence. It is neither and both. It is so many things because it has so many contexts, and any understanding must be embedded in those contexts, just like Christianity and just like democracy.

I know it is a tough world out there right now. But I encourage you to take advantage of the intellectual refuge offered by curiosity, amateurism, nuance and complexity. You do not have to have the answers, but like Socrates, that may be your wisdom, not your weakness. Better to embrace what you do not yet know in order to become a better version of yourself. Our brave amateurism – as our love for larger intellectual spaces - is a gift to the world, much more authentic and valuable than denying the complexity that defines the world we live in.