Abstract

Part II: "Mr. Baldwin’s Aspirations": On Buckley’s Understanding of James Baldwin
- Buckley portrayed Baldwin as a dangerous ideologue.
- Contended that in his debate speech and his copious literature of protest Baldwin argued “that we ought to recognize that American Civilization, and indeed Western Civilization, has failed him and his people, [and] that we ought to throw it over.”
- Buckley wrote later, Baldwin’s views are marked by “essential irrationalities” and “he and his cohort of America-haters” ought “to be ghettoized in the corners of fanaticism.”
- Buckley was warning his audience, Baldwin is tempting his readers to replace “the faith of our fathers” with the “utopian utopianism” of the Communists.

Part III: “I Think All Theories Are Suspect”: Baldwin’s Skepticism of Ideology
- In Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin set two goals for himself: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer.” Baldwin’s pursuit of these interrelated goals led him to be deeply suspicious of ideology.
- “To examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source” – not just what Baldwin believed ought to guide the writer; he believed this ought to guide all human beings in their quest to discover truth.
- Theories and ideologies are, by design, tools to help us simplify the world. This “passion for categorization,” this desire to “have life neatly fitted into pegs,” Baldwin argues in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” often moves us further from the truth.
- In the “Autobiographical Notes,” Baldwin writes: I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one’s own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.
- Baldwin linked his epistemological and moral concerns about ideology by saying that one of the commonest casualties of ideological thinking (and the rigorous indignation it tends to breed), “is personal humility.”

Part IV: “Freedom is Hard to Bear”: Buckley and Baldwin on the Meaning of Freedom
- “liberty,” Baldwin writes, “a genuine political possibility, in spite of the fact that the word is so often used as a slogan” and “freedom” is “beyond politics, though affecting politics and affected by” politics.
- The dominant person or group need not actually interfere with an individual to deprive him of his freedom; interference is not a necessary ingredient of their ability to control others.
- “For freedom, in short, is the liberation from delusion about oneself, others, and history.”
- It is precisely because freedom, as Buckle points out, is so difficult, and uncomfortable that most people have no interest in pursuing it.
- Myth, Baldwin argues, allows us to engage in “moral evasion.” The “collection of myths” to which we cling “function as ideological weapons we use to ward off lacking responsibility for ourselves – as individuals and as communities – and serve as the source of irrational euoeerence about our virtue as individuals and our “exceptionalism” as a nation.
- What this mythologized narrative ignores or downplays is the heroic triumph of African-Americans in the face of this oppression.
- “If the Negroes were not here, we might be forced to deal within ourselves and our own personalities, with all those sins, all those consummations, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro race.” This is why “the Negroes play such a crucial function as the bottom rung.”

References

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