
Nicholas Buccola and Maggie Hawkins
Department of Political Science
Linfield College, McMinnville, OR

Abstract

In this essay, we explore James Baldwin’s understanding of freedom through an examination of his famous debate with the conservative polemicist William F. Buckley Jr. at the Cambridge Union in 1965. During the course of the debate, Buckley attempts to show that Baldwin was a wild-eyed extremist who was bent on overturning “American civilization.” Buckley saw Baldwin as a threat, to borrow the language of the National Review “Mission Statement,” to the “tradition of fixed postulates having to do with the meaning of existence, with the relationship of the state to the individual, of the individual to his neighbor, so clearly enunciated in the enabling documents of our Republic.” In sum, it is far to say that Buckley thought Baldwin was an “enemy of freedom.” Rather, Buckley was right to perceive Baldwin as a threat to his worldview, but that he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of Baldwin’s critique. In order to make this case, we challenge Buckley’s portrayal of Baldwin as an ideological extremist and we compare what Buckley and Baldwin had in mind when they talked about freedom. Our aim, in other words, is not to offer a comprehensive comparative analysis of Buckley and Baldwin, but rather to use Buckley’s misunderstanding of Baldwin as the basis for an exploration of how Baldwin challenged — and attempted to transform — how we think about freedom.

Introduction

Part I: Reconstruction of Buckley’s portrayal of Baldwin in the debate

Part II: “Mr. Baldwin’s Aspirations”: On Buckley’s Understanding of James Baldwin

Buckley portrayed Baldwin as a dangerous ideologue.
- Confirmed 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 “exasperating irrationalities” and “a lack of overweening ambition” as “the millennium in the corners of fanaticism.”
- Buckley was warning his audience, Baldwin is attempting to replace the “faith of our fathers” with the “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.” Buckley of this pair of interrelated goals led him to be deeply suspicious of ideology:
- “To examine ethics, to go beneath the surface, to touch the core” – 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 Protestant Novel,” often moves us further from the truth.
- In the “Autobiographic 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 a little.”
- Baldwin linked his epistemological and moral concerns about ideology by saying that one of the commonest cases of ideological thinking (and the righteous indignation it tends to breed), is “personal humility.”

Part IV: “Freedom is Hard to Bear”: Buckley and Baldwin on the Meaning of Freedom

- “Identity,” Baldwin writes, “is a genuine political possibility, in spite of the fact that the word is so often used as a slur” 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.
- Freedom, in short, is the liberation from delusion about oneself, others, and history.
- It is precisely because freedom, as Baldwin understands it, 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 taking responsibility for ourselves — as individuals and as communities — and serve as the source of irrational exuberance 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 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 consummats, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro race.” This is why “the Negro” plays such a crucial function as “the bottom rung.”

References

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