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**Review of *Why We're Polarized* by Ezra Klein; *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* by Dannagal Goldthwaite Young; *Prius or Pickup? How Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide* by Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler**

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therapy an appropriate intervention for older adults across practice settings. While there is growing public awareness of the positive effects of music therapy, healthcare professionals and social workers alike often struggle to integrate this knowledge with standard best practice interventions.

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Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*. Avid Reader/Simon and Shuster (2020), 312 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*. Oxford University Press (2020), 267 pages, \$27.95 (hardcover).

Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Prius or Pickup? How Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2018), 259 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

A couple years back as I was looking for some summer recreational reading, I spotted this book, *Prius or Pickup?*, thinking it would be a light-hearted and humorous romp through America's culture wars. Although the prose is very accessible, what I got instead was a serious treatise by two academic political scientists examining recent research on a much different and more important divide: specifically, a divide in the cultural world views held by our fellow Americans, as well as of many other nations. The consumer preferences in the title turn out to be real, but much more reflective of world views, as well as other symptomatic indicators. Written soon after the 2016 election, the book is focused much more on trying to understand the results of that election than on motor vehicle preferences. Yet, the correlations are statistically significant.

The key issue that demarcates the divide in world views these authors tease out and expand upon can be summarized as, how dangerous do you perceive the world to be? As the saying goes,

if there is one constant in our lives, it is change. But how do you perceive that change? Those these authors characterize as *fixed* in their world view tend toward perceiving change as perilous and threatening. They resist change and seek protection from what they see as the inevitably dangerous aspects of change. In contrast, those characterized as *fluid* in their world view see change primarily in terms of opportunities, of openings that foster movement in positive directions. To these people, change is to be embraced, not resisted. According to these authors' reading of the research, people fall roughly equally on either side of this divide, although with varying strengths of conviction. One thinks here of Erik Erikson's first stage of development, characterized by basic trust/mistrust of the world.

The book demonstrates a wide-ranging strength of the idea that our basic world view has a great impact on how we respond to decisions and choices throughout our lives. As far as social workers are concerned, perhaps the most important point is the differences between the ways that the fixed and the fluid raise their children. The fixed strive to instill characteristics of obedience, good manners and respect for authority; the fluid strive to instill independence of thought, a sense of curiosity and exploration. Nonetheless, while Hetherington and Weiler do provide some 20 pages of endnote references, one might well suspicion that their presentation is over-simplified, that the argument was too binary and neatly tied up; more specifically, that there had to be a lot more folks like me out here who have clear sympathies with characteristics of both the fixed and the fluid! So finally, I read the book, mused on it a bit, and more or less forgot about it.

I recently revisited the book, however, as two more recent volumes came across my desk, each of which, in its own way, support and extend with more evidence and reflection the basic viewpoint of Hetherington and Weiler. One of these is *Irony and Outrage*, written by Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, who heads up the Center for Political Communication at the University of Delaware. Young is very interested in styles of communication, and discerns from her own and others' research a division corresponding very closely to Hetherington and Weiler's categories of fixed and fluid. Her route into this was trying to determine as a media scholar why "outrage" media (radio,

television, internet) is so clearly the domain of conservative end of the spectrum, while irony and satire are equally dominated by the liberal end. To put it another way, why is there almost no successful conservative equivalent of *Saturday Night Live* or *The Daily Show*, and almost no successful liberal equivalent of Rush Limbaugh or FOX Network programming?

To answer this, Young looks at the communicative strategies of each medium form. She concludes that outrage communication assumes a very strong and clear set of values, norms and ethics that are in one way or another being violated, and the outrage is vented directly against those (usually liberals in politics, media or culture leadership) who are identified as the perpetrating violators. Liberals also see outrageous values, norms and ethics violations in the world. However, their analysis trends away from binary categories, and toward more nuanced recognition of factors such as mixed motivations and unintended consequences, that undermine a pure sense of righteous outrage. The longer conservative commentators, who like those of the *fixed* mentality treasure order and closure, stick with a topic, the more outraged they and their audiences become. In contrast, the longer liberal commentators, who like those of the *fluid* mentality treasure openness and ambiguity, stick with a topic, the more they bring out many sides of the issue and thus dilute rather than stoke the initial sense of outrage the topic may have elicited.

This same dynamic applies to comedic communication. While there are certainly comedians who are personally conservative, comedy as a genre is veritably rooted in a willingness to violate and ridicule the proprieties of good order. Bob Hope, as one case in point, was a Reagan Republican, yet even his routines on USO tours revolved largely around spoofing military discipline and other foibles of army life. Irony is one form of comedy suited to the liberal fondness for ambiguity and "saying it without saying it," that is, demanding that the listener draw on information not actually part of the bit itself in order to connect the dots and arrive at the intended humor. I am reminded of a joke my pre-teen daughter (now in college and a voracious consumer of irony comedy) once thought hilarious: *I look forward to the day when a chicken can simply cross a road without everyone feeling the need to examine*

her motivations for doing so! If you think of all of the strands of cultural knowledge not stated directly but only alluded to here, and which the listener must provide to find it at all funny, you see that at which Young's understanding of irony is driving.

The second recent book is Ezra Klein's, *Why We're So Polarized*. Klein is an upcoming public intellectual and one of the pioneers of both blogging and then podcasting as forms of publication and medium for exploring issues of politics and social policy. For the past decade his voice has been heavily present in the debate on healthcare policy (he supports a single-payer system), and more recently he has also become very invested in exploring the polarization that increasingly characterizes politics in America and beyond. This book is at least a first attempt at summarizing his findings. Although Klein does not employ Hetherington and Weiler's categories of fixed and fluid, he does endorse the idea that psychology strongly impacts political leanings and that among the psychological elements, fear is perhaps the most basic. In other words, whether you see the world as a fundamentally dangerous place, or a fundamentally friendly place, does largely predict the pool of related social policies you are likely to support.

Klein sees this as a constant. So then, why do we see such a strong push toward polarization that we did not see in previous decades? Klein suggests that throughout most of American history, we have really had four parties and not just two, and that each of these factions had a geographical base. Until recently we had both liberals and conservatives in both of the two dominating political parties, and in the give and take of policy sausage making, coalitions of liberal Republicans and Democrats versus coalitions of conservative Republicans and Democrats, were even more common than Republicans versus Democrats. Thus, on any given issue, the need was to move toward a 'center' in order to hammer out the specifics of laws and social policies.

As Klein sees it, it is not that we are that much more *polarized* than we once were, but much more that we have become *tribalized*. That is, as southern-based conservative Democrats (reacting largely to civil rights issues) have left

the Democratic Party and joined the Republican Party, and as liberal Republicans (largely based in the northeast) were slowly squeezed out of positions of power in the Republican Party, and have remained dormant or joined the Democratic Party, party identification increasingly takes on a tenor of tribal identity and not simply that of political identification.

Klein expertly traces this dynamic of polarization and tribalization. Essentially, once the process of polarization has begun, there is subtle reinforcement for moves in the direction of further polarization and disconfirmation for that which encourages moves toward the center. This can occur at a quite rapid pace; just think of Nelson Rockefeller moving from Vice President to all but complete marginalization within the Republican Party in less than a decade, or the downward career slope of just about any Pro-Life Democrat you can name. But Klein is not all that worried about polarization per se; one could even argue that voting Democratic or Republican means more in our time than it did previously. The real danger to our democratic system comes as polarized political identification creeps over into tribalized social identity. It is one thing when knowing someone's political party affiliation gives you more than betting odds on pinpointing that person's stand on various hot button social issues. It is something else altogether when knowing someone's political affiliation yields more than betting odds on a growing list of all kinds of consumer preferences, favored media outlets, preferences in spectator sports, clothing styles and hundreds of other items we could tick off (as said, a growing list, including most recently wearing or not wearing a covid19-protective mask). Just about anything and everything has become or can become a signal of such tribal identification.

Klein is particularly impressed by studies showing that large numbers of people will express initial support for a policy idea until they are informed that it is a policy supported by the opposite political party, after which become adamantly opposed to it. Whether or not the American experiment in representative democracy can survive this kind of extreme tribalization of the social landscape is an open question, and Klein is frankly not very optimistic. That such tribalization of identity is occurring is undeniable, and thus we circle right back from Klein and Young to *Prius or Pickup?*

While I chose to review these books as a group, each of them can be read and assigned to classes singly. Especially those who teach social policy classes at the undergraduate level should benefit from having these books on their mental horizons. Students will find them engaging to read and valuable for sorting out debates on topical issues.

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