

Baldwin Defeated Buckley but What Does His Victory Mean Today?

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The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America. By Nicholas Buccola. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 496p. \$29.95 cloth.

Political thought from the classical to the modern era provides ample evidence that theorists and philosophers felt compelled—obligated even—to align their work with the urgency of the moment. From Aristotle to Marx, political theorizing was often in the business of helping intellectuals *and* the wider reading public (however that was defined at the moment) understand the nature of their social, economic, and political reality. The middle of the twentieth century was a disaster for this ethos. A sense of owing the public insight on behalf of the good society acquired a tarnish that provoked disdain in a rapidly professionalizing field engaging in a kind of academic jingoism by way of its insistence on jargon and radical abstractness. This folly of narrowness and intolerance, however, has begun to be slowly reversed by scholars mindful of both the pull of the wider world of common-sense ideas and of a sense of duty to society beyond the ivory tower. Nicholas Buccola's deftly executed *The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley, and the Debate over Race in America* stands as an exemplar of what it could mean for a political theorist to simultaneously be a serious scholar and an equally accessible investigator of history and analyst of our present.

The Fire Is upon Us provides an intellectual and historical account of the American racial story just prior to the contemporary context, as well as the lasting reverberations of a historical American showdown: the 1965 Cambridge Union debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., for which the motion was "Resolved: The American dream is at the expense of the American negro." Baldwin decisively crushed Buckley and won the resolution. But Buccola's aim is not to enlighten readers as to how Baldwin won or why it was a good day for the arc of justice when he triumphed. Rather, more valuably, the engine of the book is Buccola's interest in figuring out why *that* debate took place and why it occurred between *these* two men. To be clear, these are not justificatory questions. Rather, they are entry points for readers to develop their

own critical sensibility of both the deep racial trouble the United States was in then and the historical roles Baldwin and Buckley played in shaping a moment with which we, in 2020, are currently reckoning. I suspect the question Buccola really wants readers to ask, in the end, from our current point of view, is, Who—beyond winning the debate—won the fight to define America's racial ethos?

The place to begin assessing a book like *Fire* is to understand the method that guides its mission. On the surface, Buccola's aim could be described as historically and biographically synthetic. On the one side is Baldwin, the son with slave ancestry, just one generation removed. On the other side is Buckley, a man born into the very picture of elite white privilege and wealth. Baldwin, the son of a racially and psychologically tormented man of god and a woman who was at his mercy while raising eight children; Buckley, the son of a godless capitalist and a god-fearing mother whose overt racism was intentionally cultivated as white paternalism. Baldwin "remember[s] my father had trouble keeping us alive," whereas the Buckley estate "featured a large mansion and extensive staff to tend to the large family's needs" (pp. 17, 11). Indeed, the opening chapter's title—"The Ghetto and the Mansion"—sets up an enduring juxtaposition, which carries the book to its conclusion, between two American men whose very experience and idea of America could not differ any more than it did, even as they each in his own way felt he was fighting for the same thing: America's salvation.

This shared goal, one that was nonetheless pursued by each man with vehement opposition toward the other's vision, captures what amounts to a simultaneous reality and partial illusion with these sorts of synthetic projects. The partial illusion is that the defining meeting between such apposite personalities was destined to happen. This is understandable in any such book, because it lends to the mystique of the moment and drama of the subject. And yet, the reality of the synthesis is that, in fact, these two men, as avatars of two sides of a struggle, were, indeed, in a

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sense destined to clash. So long as America was the kind of place it was, the place of the ghetto and the mansion, someone *like* Baldwin and someone *like* Buckley were destined to be moral adversaries.

This is a sensibility Buccola works hard at subtly instilling in his reader. The book remains faithful to a core conceptual principle in the theory and philosophy of race that extends from W. E. B. Du Bois to contemporary thinkers like Michael Dawson and beyond: America is one land but is home to at least two life-worlds, one white and one Black, and your experience of this nation will depend entirely on which life-world you inhabit. The very structure of the book smartly pushes the reader back and forth between these life-worlds. Across a prologue, eight chapters, and an epilogue, Buccola consistently has readers look at America from Baldwin's perspective and then from Buckley's and then back again. The effect, ultimately, is that one of these perspectives—Baldwin's—is more morally astute and, in the end, vastly preferable to the other.

How can we characterize Baldwin's and Buckley's views? Neither Baldwin nor Buckley were what we consider today professional philosophers, but they hailed from an era in which to be a public intellectual was also to be far more than a mere talking head or media personality; it meant, in fact, to be as close as a non-specialist could get to being a professional philosopher. Though both the explicit and implied debates between Baldwin and Buckley traversed a wide range of topics and ideas, it is possible to surmise the foundational issue between the two men in the following manner: What is freedom, who is it for, and what should be done when the people who ought to have it feel their freedom is threatened? It is easy enough to anticipate some of Baldwin's answers to these questions, and I will come to his answers shortly. One of the most provocative aspects of *Fire*, however, is its exceedingly clear-eyed, unflinching, and admirably tolerant portrayal of Buckley, for whom these questions clearly ought to be tallied each and every time in favor of the elite white man.

Buckley's rise began from on high. He spent the majority of his childhood and pre-adult years privately tutored by a small army of educators who worked for the Buckley family. Aside from a short period spent at a boarding school, Buckley did not enter an intellectual world beyond his family dinner table until he attended Yale as an undergraduate. Readers who today associate Yale with little more than elite white privilege and a kind of highly qualified liberalism, at least among its administration, will be rather surprised to find that in the 1950s, when Yale was an institution exclusively in service to white men, Buckley was nevertheless the campus's most stalwart and radical promoter of right-wing ideas. Buckley ceaselessly castigated the institution for being home to godless men and for losing a sense of what it owed "civilization." Let's pause on that word.

Almost no idea consumed Buckley more than that of "[western] civilization." What is important about this feature of his, and about Buccola's own emphasis on it throughout, is that Buckley explicitly meant without ambiguity what nearly all "westerners" meant implicitly by "civilization": the supremacy of white people. Full stop. But there were further implications. Buckley unabashedly aimed to be, like his mother, a principled yet ruggedly realistic white supremacist. His position was that Blacks could have the freedoms they wanted when they had shown they had become the white man's equal in wisdom and personal character. Until then, all things, including the vote, should be withheld from them.

To Buckley's credit, he at least attempted to shore up his racism with genuine theoretical frameworks. He was strongly on the side of states' rights. He often publicly renounced what he considered to be mere racist rabble and sought to have rough-around-the-edges whites, alongside Blacks, be made to capitulate before "better whites." He also sought the aid of right-minded constitutionalists. And he was infamously wary of the idea that we are ever morally mandated to pursue public political goals, preferring instead a twisted communitarianism that allowed apoplectic racial violence because, what else could Blacks expect? Protesting Blacks were seeking to actively disrupt how southerners had grown used to living. But the problem for Buckley, in the end, was that for all his panache, he was still a racist, and this clouded any ability he had to be intellectually honest. Ultimately, he did not really want equality—he wanted supremacy. So much so that his greatest fear was, as he put it, "when the Negroes have finally realized their long dream of attaining the status of the white man...I hope the white man will still be free" (p. 148).

Why did Buckley think Black freedom was a zero-sum game at the white man's peril? In general, the very idea of Blacks protesting en masse, apparently fomenting white retaliation, existentially terrified Buckley. But let us indulge, reasonably, in a bit of the dramatic and say that it was Baldwin who struck fear in his heart. This is a more than appropriate statement given that, as Buccola so helpfully informs us, Baldwin features so prominently in a good number of Buckley's writings.

The line of Baldwin's that seemed to haunt Buckley was "the only thing white people have that black people need, should want, is power" (p. 286). However, Baldwin was not a crude booster of realpolitik. Fundamental to his work was a focus on moral and emotional psychology. On his account, to be racist was in fact to live in a state of constant terror. Why? Because racism was a construct of white people's need to dominate Blacks for their own sense of security, self, and, yes, power. The enduring force of Baldwin's work is the fearlessness with which he asked us to consider our internal lives on both sides of the racial divide. If we did, he believed, we would find two opposing

features of our selves: the capacity to engage in self-destruction and self-negation and the capacity for a capacious love guided by the principle that before we are white or Black, we are human. It was on *this* count primarily that Baldwin urged Blacks to want whites' power—not to counter-dominate whites but to revolutionarily reset the habits of American social engagement on terms amenable to *everyone's* humanity.

This preoccupation with safeguarding the sanctity of our inner lives was so potent for Baldwin that he applied it to any thinker or movement, no matter the color. Baldwin famously butted heads with Malcolm X, for example. As much as he fully empathized with Malcolm's motivations, Baldwin feared that Malcolm, as a spokesperson initially on behalf of the Nation of Islam (NOI), was propagating a kind of revolutionary stance that could only end in existential disaster, given its no-holds barred eye-for-an-eye disdain for white "devils." But there was an important difference: Baldwin grasped that as problematic as NOI's teachings were, they were grounded in very justified arguments in response to white supremacy, which is why so many everyday Black Americans were willing to listen to the NOI: they were fed up with the rape, abuse, murder, and exploitation that was at the very heart of white America's historical treatment of Blacks.

These sorts of juxtapositions are both the conceptual and narrative stuff of *Fire*. Indeed, one does not get to the account of the Cambridge debate until more than 250 pages into Buccola's 368-page volume. The reason is important: one cannot begin to understand the answers to why *that* debate with *these* two men until one understands the stakes of their very lives. Buccola delivers on the promise of aiding us in achieving that understanding; thus, the wait for the book's main event serves the aesthetic purpose of staging a drama after a clever bit of priming the reader, as well as the substantive purpose of pushing us to see past the glamor of two dueling men matching wits at Cambridge to the reality of two ideas of America vying for hearts and minds. Thus, we arrive at the debate question of whether the American dream comes at the expense of the "American negro" genuinely invested in how one even begins to unpack a question crackling with tension.

The force of the resolution consists in two phrases: "American dream" and "expense." The "American dream" is one of the most widely abused notions in American discourse. It serves as a vehicle for some of our most crude desires: material wealth, political power, property ownership, and prestige. But it also stands for an ethos: that glory shall go to those with the will to attain their desires. And it relies on the falsehood that the dream is readily accessible to all those with the will. How do we begin to think of that dream when, as pointed out in the debate, one-ninth (at that time) of the US population cannot seem to access it? We begin to suspect that the dazzling glory of the "City

on The Hill" is phenomenologically subsumed by the ontologically brutal darkness of group-based oppression.

The tradition of debates at Cambridge called for two undergraduates to take positions on either side of the debate. Though not the stars of the show, David Heycock and Jeremy Burford importantly set up the main duel between Baldwin and Buckley, respectively. In his brief time, Heycock implores his audience to embark on an imaginative project wherein they inhabit a land founded on the ideal of equality for all but that, in fact, systematically denies equality and freedom to one-ninth of the population on the basis of skin color. Burford's response is delivered awkwardly. He denounced race-based stigma while, in an odd bit of rhetorical jujitsu, asserting that the American dream is the one suffering, albeit on account of the racism at the heart of American politics and socioeconomic life.

I begin with Heycock and Burford because they each presaged the core strategies. On the heels of Heycock's attempt to engage the imagination of his audience, Baldwin leaned into a fundamental tenet of his writings and addresses—that racial oppression is the result of white fear, and that what it does to the moral lives of whites is maybe worse than what it does to Black lives. But understanding these points themselves depended a great deal on, as he put it, "where you find yourself in the world...your system of reality." For Baldwin, one's system of reality is what allows one to see oppression for what it was or what prompts a sheriff to put a cattle prod to a protesting woman's breast. One's system of reality is what allows the woman at the Western Union desk to look at Baldwin and conclude that "no matter how terrible their lives may be...they have one enormous knowledge, consolation, which is like a heavenly revelation—at least they are not Black."

This line of argument is a tricky one to hold but has a significant payoff. On the one hand, it has the potential to conceptually ground Black agency on the basis of developing a warped sense of self. Baldwin suggests that an effect of white supremacy is that, in seeking to destroy or distort the past, it undermines the authority of Black fathers. This last example might seem oddly specific or gendered, but for Baldwin it only meant to convey his own experience of his father's mental and emotional decline: since he died a man broken by racial rage, he could turn nowhere but toward his own son and himself. But this is where the payoff also lies, because Baldwin stood before the Cambridge Union as a survivor, as a witness. And his survival as a witness allowed him, in the end, to function within the Black prophetic tradition—he describes himself in the debate as a Jeremiah—by delivering a warning: America would socially implode if it did not get its house in order, if whites did not rescue themselves from the failure of their moral lives.

Buckley, in turn, offered his own, darker, warning in his closing statement. To appreciate its gravity, it is important

to make an observation. Whereas Baldwin's address never once mentioned Buckley by name nor was ever directed toward him or the American right-wing, Buckley spent considerable time invoking Baldwin as the emblematic problem with racial progressivism. One part of the problem is that, to hear Buckley tell it, Baldwin was representing himself in bad faith. Whereas Baldwin was positioning himself as one of the oppressed, Buckley insisted that wherever Baldwin goes, including college campuses, he is "the toast of the town" and treated with great "unction." This jibe was used by Buckley to ironically suggest that, to treat Baldwin with respect, he would not treat him with deference and, in doing so, would be acting in a manner suggesting equality by not acting according to the color of Baldwin's skin. In this way, Burford's own attempt to sidestep racial oppression itself was elevated to Buckley's level of rhetorical elegance.

Despite Buckley's famous charisma, it is difficult not to see his strategy as anything but sinister. Buccola resists such a characterization, but it is the only conclusion to reach. Buckley deploys a tactic in use to this day, whereby racial conservatives portray themselves as the most respectful of Blacks precisely because they will not be moved by sympathy. Yet that strategy is pushed further to then place the ills of Blacks squarely on their own shoulders, such as when Buckley indicts the Black population for failing to be animated by a certain productive energy to become doctors, for example, despite the fact that American Jews, the Irish, and Italians have made use of such opportunities. In making use of other successful minorities, Buckley then returned to his favored theme—the threat posed by Baldwin and those like him—by insisting that they seek to overthrow western/American civilization.

I have an exceedingly small number of criticisms of Buccola's book. One of these, maybe ironically, is that his intellectual honesty in respecting Buckley preempts him from editorializing, which is admirable in an age where any and all opinions seek to occupy a place of final judgment. Yet, Buckley's closing warning deserved it. For in response to the false claim that Baldwin, if he had his way, would demolish the West, Buckley made a counter-threat: "if it does finally come to a confrontation...then we will fight the issue, not only in the Cambridge Union, but...as you were once recently called to do on beaches and on hills." In

other words, Buckley openly threatens to wage an armed war if that is what it will take to protect "civilization" from Baldwin. And in the final insult, he claims he would do so, in the end, not only for whites' benefit, but also for that of "negroes."

Buckley and Baldwin stood on opposite sides of the shores of the American experience with the dream located on Buckley's side, and clearly, Buckley meant to keep it there, even if it meant war. In the end, *Fire* is an account of what it meant for Buckley to try and marshal the forces of white supremacist defense to keep his side of the divide all for him and white men like him, while Baldwin sought to build a bridge precisely so that there would not be two sides in the first place.

We arrive at the question posed at the beginning: Which man's vision won America's future? It is abundantly clear that despite Buckley having overwhelmingly lost the resolution to Baldwin in 1965 by a vote of those in attendance, the next half-century was his. In the face of the Civil Rights Act, white supremacy and privilege retrenched itself discursively in the language of personal responsibility to offload Black poverty onto Blacks, as well as corporeally in the massive growth of the carceral state. Nixon's war on welfare was inherited and pursued not just by Reagan's Republican administration, but also by Bill Clinton's Democratic administration. Importantly, Joe Biden, the 2020 Democratic nominee, was there for it all, arguing vehemently for a racially charged crime bill in the early 1990s. But something seems to have shifted. In the Trump era, almost a decade of Black Lives Matter protests have culminated in surprisingly serious government proposals to defund the police forces in many cities or to at least radically reconsider the amount of power they have. Confederate statues are toppling like dominoes, and even storied institutions like Princeton seem to desire to disentangle themselves from problematic building names. In other words, it is possible—but only possible—that Baldwin's moment has truly arrived. This is the hope inspired by Buccola's fine volume. But that is not its value. Rather, the lesson of *Fire* is that genuine hope begins with honesty—honesty about our politics, about our economics, about our institutions but, most importantly, about ourselves.