

## PARTISAN PRINCIPLES



Partisan conflict is such a fixture of American life these days that we might be forgiven for assuming we invented it. But a wry voice from another

country in a distant age suggests that political divides, like death and taxes, have always been with us. Or so I was reminded last year while researching a magazine profile of the great English writer William Hazlitt.

Nearly two centuries ago, on April 25, 1830, Hazlitt published “Party Spirit,” an essay on the sharp political lines defining his country. Although he wrote it as a primer on the political landscape of his own day and place, which included perpetual spats between Whigs and Tories, Hazlitt knew that partisanship was, in varying degrees, a universal preoccupation.

Partisanship wasn’t just driven by true policy differences, Hazlitt reminded his readers. It thrived because it felt good.

First and foremost, Hazlitt pointed out, partisanship promoted the guilty pleasure of sanctimony. If we could convince ourselves that our opponents were evil and debased, then we could also, by convenient corollary, congratulate ourselves on being superior and virtuous.

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“This is a happy mode of pampering our self-complacency,” he wrote, “and persuading ourselves that we and those that side with us, are ‘salt of the earth’; of giving vent to the morbid humours of our pride, envy and all uncharitableness, those natural secretions of the human heart, under the pretext of self-defense, the public safety or a voice from Heaven... . We thus desolate the globe, or tear a country in pieces, to show that we are the only people fit to live in it; and fancy ourselves angels, while we are playing the devil.”

Considering such pretenses of purity, Hazlitt elaborated what could well be the first definition of political correctness: “We may be intolerant even in advocating the cause of Toleration, and so bent on making proselytes to free-thinking as to allow no one to think freely but ourselves.”

One of Hazlitt’s pet theories was that humans were simply wired for animosity, and he mentioned partisanship among other examples of what he saw as a basic biological tendency to savor a grudge. His famous essay “The Pleasure of Hating” argued that finding something to loathe kept a lot of us going. “Nature,” he mused, “seems (the more we look into it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by the jarring interests, the unruly passions, of men.” Hazlitt wouldn’t be surprised, one gathers, if he were able to witness today’s gladiatorial orgy of talk radio and cable news.

He was much better at diagnosing partisanship than suggesting a cure. One thing Hazlitt inadvertently taught, through example, is that it’s easier to see partisanship in others than in yourself. Biographer Duncan Wu notes that although Hazlitt admired Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverly* novels, he declined to meet their author because he detested Scott’s conservatism.

At his best, though, Hazlitt envisioned a political culture that pointed outward, toward consensus, rather than inward, toward narrow tribal loyalties. That ideal, however elusive, is needed now more than ever. “The love of liberty,” he famously observed, “is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves.”

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