

The Polarization Pandemic: Debord, Foucault, and Fanon Explain What Went Wrong

By: Josh Grand

Forgive my naivety, as I have only recently begun my journey into meaningful discourse, but it seems as though everybody just wants to hear the sound of their own voice. Seldom do I feel that the other party even listens to what I say. My words, to them, merely serve as an intermission before the next act. I do not mean to suggest that I am the pinnacle of human communication. As a matter of fact, I invite you to question the hypocrisy of my writing of eight pages to complain about the narcissistic nature of society. Believe me, though, that if you take the time to read my treatise, I would undoubtedly, in turn, take the time to hear your two cents. That is, after all, what I am trying to say: let's hear each other out.

In a society where individuals do not value each other's opinions, President Barack Obama asserts, "democracy will wither."¹ The United States has entered an era of unprecedented polarization in the last century. As individuals become less open to dialogue, the prospect of compromise evaporates. There now only remains two dozen moderate Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, a severe decline from the 160 in 1970.² Rampant radicalization has produced "ideological silos" on both sides of the political spectrum. Among the voting population, 36% of Republicans and 27% of Democrats now view the opposing party as a "threat to the nation's well-being."³ The inflammation of partisan antipathy poses dangers not exclusively to government efficiency but also, as Obama noted, to the very state of our democracy. In this paper, I will not be, nor do I believe myself capable of, presenting a cure to this social virus. Rather, I will examine the issue through the lens of Debord's "spectacle," Foucault's notion of identity, and Fanon's decolonization theory to understand how society ended up in such a state of division.

I would be obtuse to overlook the role that media consumption plays in the shaping of our perspectives. It is, in my opinion, no coincidence that the burgeoning use of social media in our society follows nearly an identical trend as the increasing social polarization². Our minds have

¹ "Disinformation Is Weakening Democracy, Barack Obama Said." *Stanford News*, 25 Apr. 2022, news.stanford.edu/2022/04/21/disinformation-weakening-democracy-barack-obama-said

² DeSilver, Drew. "The Polarization in Today's Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 10 Mar. 2022, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/.

³ Political Polarization in the American Public." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, Pew Research Center, 12 June 2014, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/.

become a marketplace used to reinforce a consumerist global order. Guy Debord, for one, would be quick to underscore the reality of a digital age: algorithms dominate the trajectory of our psyche. In his magnum opus, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord explores the idea, well before the introduction of social media, that life is merely presented as “an immense accumulation of spectacles.”⁴

The concept that each individual is experiencing life through their own respective ‘spectacle’ is a difficult one to grasp. Imagine, though, your memories are compiled as an alternative reality. After mental “capital” is consummated, it is then inserted as another building block of this construct. Your alternative reality, essentially, shapes your outlook on reality. Debord summarizes the role of the spectacle best, declaring it “the heart of this real society’s unreality.”⁴ The present-day “unreality,” though, has become vastly misconstrued through the radical narratives – in conjunction with the rapid spread of misinformation – propagated across social media platforms. Once exposed to one half-truth, these platforms tailor their algorithms to suffocate users with radical partisanship. There is, after all, always “objective reality present on both sides.”⁴ As a result, though, the whole truth becomes virtually unattainable to the individual. I present this interpretation of the modern-day spectacle not to bring into question the freedom of individual thought but rather to expose the alienation in social relations that it creates. The further one strays from the full truth, the more difficult it becomes to acknowledge the existence of the other half-truth. As social interactions become plagued with disagreement and strife, contempt builds for the opposition. This ignites what Debord labels, a “vicious circle of isolation” where humans, as inherently factious people, seek out like-minded individuals and surround themselves with fellow half-truthers.

The intellectual foundations of identity politics are often traced to the Foucauldian doctrine of postmodern philosophy. Political advancement, Foucault noted following the Paris student uprising in May 1968, has ceased to be delivered through “parties, trade unions, bureaucracy, and politics” but rather has transformed into an issue of “individual and moral concern.”⁵ This concept, which aligns with Debord’s perspective of human gravitation towards polarization, is rooted in the post-modern human tendency to prioritize power structures and

⁴ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Unredacted Word, 2021.

⁵ Foucault, Michel 2000. Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity. In: Rabinow, Paul (ed). *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

labels over individual thought and agency. The problem, Foucault asserts, is that individuals no longer pursue the aspects of life that give them pleasure. Instead, when confronted with the crossroads of decision-making, they simply ask: “Does this thing conform to my identity?”⁵ Foucault cites the external pressure to conform to these groups as the emerging driver of identity in a post-modern era. The agency of one’s inner self to shape their own identity has effectively been surpassed, on a grand scale, by factors beyond our control. Foucault, when questioned on the divergence in society, declared that the social shifts are “not due to political parties, but the result of its movements.”⁵ The danger here lies, though, in the polarization of political parties. As the base of each caucus shifts further from the median, individuals are forced into more radicalized thought in their effort to conform to party lines². Rapidly, the middle of the spectrum has transformed into a barren wasteland. Sustained party isolation prevents outside perspectives from reaching its members, and as the stalemate prolongs, it becomes unfathomable to empathize with such “radical” opposition. Inevitably, both sides begin to grow resentment for the other – and, consequently, identity politics polarize the political sphere.

This idea of a factious society in perpetual civil conflict is precisely what Frantz Fanon depicts in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon develops this idea through his theory of decolonization, a concept which he outlines as “the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in colonies”⁶. Fanon speaks of a Manichean world, drawing examples from North African natives battling the oppression of the French colonialists in the 20th century. The similarities drawn between the human psyche amidst colonization and that of modern-day society revolve around Manichean Logic. Fanon describes this concept as, essentially, the “compartmentalization of society.”⁶ This supposition asserts that the roots of dualism are based on the dichotomous and hierarchical structure of our world. The power dynamics that result from modern institutions necessarily place individuals – and the factions that follow – fundamentally at odds with one another. It only becomes a matter of time, Fanon notes, until both sides begin to view the other as “a sort of quintessence of evil.”⁶ Fanon argues that the opposition’s belief system “can only be called in question by absolute violence.” All further analysis of this work, though, will be conducted on the assumption that violence is not, in

⁶ Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin, 1990.

fact, inevitable. Instead, I intend only to elaborate on the intellectual processes within the individual that result from this initial societal split.

The evolution of thought that Fanon outlines in these factious societies closely resembles, at least on the surface, those Debord and Foucault previously introduced. This is first noticeable, he points out, by both sides’ “inaptitude... to carry on a two-sided discussion.”⁶ Identity politics, once again, proves to be a byproduct of a divided society. This perpetual cycle of isolation is only reinforced by the comfort one can find among the purported like-minded individuals within one’s ideological silo. A lack of opposing rhetoric, then, leads to the extinction of critical thinking. With the loss of critical thinking, the very act which separates *Homo sapiens* from the other predators of the global food chain, Fanon declares that our “individualism is the first to disappear.”⁶ Each individual will no longer “say that they represent the truth, for they *are* the truth.”⁶ In this world where critical thinking has been eradicated, the argument against Fanon’s proclamation of inevitable violence begins to look bleak. Democracy, a system of government in which state power is vested in the general population of the state, has persisted for over two hundred years in America because of its very ability to support divisiveness in society. Extreme polarization, however, cannot be sustained in any sort of representative government system. When political leaders begin to regard each other as existential enemies, institutions weaken, and compromise becomes impossible. This “violence of faction” is precisely what James Madison warned of in Federalist 10, citing the willingness for leaders to yield power to opponents as the foundation of a democratic system.⁷

To be clear, I did not intend for this essay to adopt any sort of alarmist perspective. In exploring this process of intense polarization, however, it has become apparent to me that this is our reality. Donald Trump’s rise to power was not by chance; the American people had begun their social divergence long before 2016². Intense negative partisanship – the tendency of voters to form their political opinions primarily in opposition to political parties they dislike – is ultimately what enabled Trump to tap into the racial and ethnic anxiety that many groups within American society had previously masked. Large masses within the American public, many of whom were previously diametrically opposed, united against a perceived common enemy. The reality, though, is that we are our own worst enemies. Buying into a hateful narrative and

⁷ Madison, James. "Federalist No. 10." The Federalist Papers. New American Library, 1961.

scapegoating minority groups will not solve our nation’s problems. An effective democracy requires unity. This, however, does not mean a nation united in hatred. It means a nation united in its respect for discourse and compromise – respect for those who hold opposing viewpoints. How, then, do we make people see eye to eye again? Or, at the very least, make them listen to what each other has to say?

As previously determined, I do not, at least at this moment, find myself capable of curing the polarization pandemic currently plaguing American society. What I have learned from writing this article, however, is that one’s drift towards radicalization should not be labeled as a mere representation of their individual preferences. Debord, Foucault, and Fanon would all agree that the polarized perspectives that individuals adopt instead are a product of their external environment. Mass media, social conditions, and identity politics act in concert to distort our “real society’s unreality.”⁴ If there is one lesson to take away from this paper, it is the necessity of humanity’s willingness to acknowledge our vulnerability. Acknowledge your own vulnerability, open your mind to opposing perspectives, and recognize the dangers of your partisanship. Acknowledge the vulnerability of others; do not insult their intellect and disregard their beliefs because they have assumed a different perspective. And, most importantly, acknowledge the vulnerability of society; take the time to empathize with those whom you disagree with while appreciating how much you share as a fellow human being. In an era of polarization, I ask not for unity but for empathy. For, if we lose the ability to commune with one another, we jeopardize our very sense of humanity.