Three languages of politics

We all know that political debates often deteriorate into acrimonious affairs. Each side talks past the other and spends more time and effort demonizing their opponent than discussing their disagreements dispassionately and fairly. It's almost as though they're speaking different languages. Why is that? Arnold Kling, adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, thinks he knows why. He has identified three "mythologies" in our contemporary politics: liberal, conservative and libertarian. I'd prefer using a different word than mythology such as filter or framework but let's go with Kling's use of the word myth.

Kling claims that the liberal's or "progressives' myth revolves around the axis of oppressors and oppressed. Progressives see themselves as standing up for groups that were historically oppressed." On the other hand the conservatives' myth revolves around the axis of civilization and barbarism. Conservatives see themselves as standing up for the institutions and traditions that constrain man's barbarous instincts and preserve civilization. And finally, libertarians see issues in terms of individual freedom and coercion. (Note: I'd put Objectivists in with libertarians except that Objectivists favor self-interest upon which they feel liberty is based. Politically they support freedom to act and from coercion just like libertarians but Objectivists base their theory of rights on self-interest.)

Kling doesn't try to explain why these three narratives have appeared. Nonetheless I think he is onto something. Several other writers have tried to explain the origin of these mythologies.

Writer Robert Bidinotto has written extensively on how we interpret the world through narratives or stories. As he says, narratives "provide us with our foundational interpretive template for understanding the world around us." He holds that "these Narratives are pre-philosophical; in fact, they are acquired in their germinal forms while we are still far too young to subject them to critical analysis. They thus actually tend to determine which abstract philosophies, ideologies, economic theories, and political policies we find appealing." (I also think the temperament with which we're born influences toward certain narratives.)

But that begs the question: why do we find certain narratives appealing? Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and professor of ethical leadership at New York University, contends that morality binds and blinds. It binds us with people who share the same morality but it also blinds us to the perspective of people who don't share our morality. Haidt's research lead him to conclude that moral beliefs can be based on one of more of these foundations.

1. Care/harm for others.

2. Fairness/cheating

3. Liberty/oppression

4. Loyalty/betrayal to your group, family, nation.

5. Authority/subversion for tradition and legitimate authority

6. Sanctity/degradation

As you can see several of his moral foundations parallel Kling's three moral languages.

Haidt's research also revealed that liberals, conservatives and libertarians gravitated to different foundations. Liberals lean towards fairness while libertarians favor liberty/oppression. What I find interesting is that Haidt feels conservatives value all six foundations almost equally.

Let me shift gears here by introducing another thinker: Ken Wilber, philosopher and psychological theorist. Wilber has created a four quadrant model that divides world views along two axis: individual/collective (or communal) [upper/lower hemispheres] and internal/external [left/right hemispheres]. The bottom right quadrant covers the exterior collective or social world. Think of Hilary Clinton's It Takes a Village to Raise a Child. The bottom left is the interior collective which includes cultural and tradition cherished by conservatives. If a conservative wrote a book similar to Hilary's it would be titled It Takes The Bible To Raise A Child. In his system the upper left quadrant

represents the interior individual perspective of Objectivists and libertarians. Their book would be It Takes Atlas Shrugged (or Human Action) To Raise a Child. The upper right quadrant houses the exterior individual.

Ken Wilber notes, "When it comes to the cause of human suffering, liberals tend to believe in objective causation, whereas conservatives tend to believe in subjective causation. That is, if an individual is suffering, the typical liberal tends to blame objective social institutions (if you are poor it is because you are oppressed by society), whereas the typical conservative tends to blame subjective factors (if you are poor it is because you are lazy). Thus, the liberal recommends objective social interventions: redistribute the wealth, change social institutions so that they produce fairer outcomes, evenly slice the economic pie, aim for equality among all. The typical conservative recommends that we instill family values, demand that individuals assume more responsibility for themselves, tighten up slack moral standards (often by embracing traditional religious values), encourage a work ethic, reward achievement, and so on."

Some people move from one quadrant to another as they mature while others settle into one quadrant. In terms of Wilber's quadrant model the liberal believes in causation from the right side of external forces while conservatives believe in the internal causation of the left side. (Wilber recognizes that his model should be flipped to line up with the left and right political spectrum.) Libertarians fall on the conservative side of the divide but libertarians (and Objectivists) give little weight to cultural or social factors in favor of individual rights and self-interest so they gravitate to the upper left quadrant while conservatives prefer the lower left quadrant.

So ultimately what is my point? That communication between these myths or world views is impossible? That we never will agree? No! The theme of my blog has been objectivity. I believe the following.

1.   Understanding that these languages or mythologies influence how people see the world and how they think.

2.   This also makes it possible for us to craft your message to improve how our message is received.

How? Here is a brief example. Let's say we're discussing welfare and entitlements with a liberal. The liberal position, being based on oppression and fairness won't respond well to the libertarian argument that welfare violates the rights of the people who pay for these benefits through taxes. Nor will they listen to the conservative who says welfare ultimately threatens civilization. I think we stand a better chance of scoring points by looking for a way to show that welfare is a form of oppression making it more difficult for people to escape their plight. We can call out statistics showing that the poor have not ultimately benefited by being supported by taxes and argue that it would help the poor more if we find ways to help them grow their way out of poverty with training, making it easier for companies to hire people, etc.

Or let's take gun control. If we're talking with a liberal and want to build a case for people being able to defend themselves with firearms I think we could be more successful if we talk about allowing the poor who live in crime riddled areas to defend themselves from being oppressed by the crime of their neighborhoods where the police are stretched thin. I'm not saying the usual arguments libertarians based on individual rights or conservatives who cite the Second Amendment are invalid.

I've used liberals in my two examples above but the same principle applies to liberals talking to libertarians or libertarians interacting with conservatives. I think we might have more civil and fruitful discussions if we try to learn which of the three frameworks the person we're talking lives in and try to fashion our argument accordingly.