

ON QUILLETTE

April 20, 2019

As American politics splinters, the artificial limits that have calcified journalism for decades also fragment. It is like seeing an expanse covered by acres of concrete suddenly shatter, and, a short time later, the emergence, through the shards, of plant life, freshly exposed to water and light. Some of those new plants are weeds. But some are new and valuable, though whether they are fragile ornamentals or robust plants with real value remains to be seen. *Quillette* is one of the fastest-growing of those plants, and my project today is to examine its role in today's political scene, especially as it relates to my own overall political project and goals.

This may seem more purely analytical than most of my writing, more akin to, say, metallurgy than politics as such. But analyzing participants in the wars to come is crucial, for strategy is all. Actually, as Lenin said, timing is all, but strategy is a close second—without strategy, you are reduced to pure reactivity, which does not lead to unbridled winning, and that latter is my goal. My project today, therefore, is to discuss what the success of, and appetite for, *Quillette* says about the Right in these days of flux.

To be sure, *Quillette* does not self-identify as Right. At first glance, its program is non-political, or cross-political. In its own words, "*Quillette* is a platform for free thought. We respect ideas, even dangerous ones. We also believe that free expression and the free exchange of ideas help human societies flourish and progress. *Quillette* aims to provide a platform for this exchange." The word that reoccurs constantly when *Quillette* discusses itself is "heterodoxy," which implies a commitment to challenge all orthodoxies, Left and Right. Moreover, "heterodoxy" does not mean "anything goes." Unsavory types, most notably racists, Marxists, and so forth, will not find any forum here.

Despite, as we'll see, several gaps between my thinking and that which *Quillette*, in general, represents, I am not down on *Quillette*. I wish it, and its organizers and writers, nothing but the best. I note that I am personally acquainted with some of its writers, and, full disclosure, several months ago I had a desultory email correspondence with staff at *Quillette* about publishing some of my reviews. But they wanted

something exclusive, not re-warmed, and I have not gotten around to offering them anything fresh cooked, though no doubt they are all sitting around waiting. (Also, I was annoyed when they recently gave Steven Pinker a platform to puff the first anniversary of his *Enlightenment Now*—not because they gave him a platform, but because Pinker listed forty or so reviews of his book to which he was responding, and did not list mine. Sad!)

On the Right, the magazine has gotten a lot of attention, not from boring movement conservatives, past their use-by date, such as Jonah Goldberg and the *National Review* crowd, but from the bubbling ferment of people most prominent on modern electronic media. Notable among this group is Jordan Peterson, who seems to have a close, if informal, relationship with *Quillette*, but also Dave Rubin and others in the so-called Intellectual Dark Web. (In practice, *Quillette* writing overlaps on both issues and perspectives with the IDW, if it's even possible to define that group in a meaningful way, but we are here to talk about *Quillette*, not the IDW.) On the Left, the magazine has gotten much less notice, but that seems likely to change, especially if, as I expect soon, an organized kill campaign of the highest intensity is launched against Peterson.

So much for structure and background. Let's move on to substance. In practice, *Quillette* embodies much of the tendency on the Right that I have named Agnostic Pragmatic Libertarianism. Certainly, there is diversity among the authors, but very few stray far from this philosophy, nor does it appear that any of the four editors, led by founder and chief editor, Claire Lehmann (an Australian) hew to any other tendency. We can look at this from two perspectives, that like two sides of a mold, combine to form the whole—first, what *Quillette* cares about, and second, what *Quillette* does not care about.

What *Quillette* cares about, primarily, is free speech. Looking at the site will show mostly topics tied in one way or another to this theme. For example, as I write, the top, "Spotlight" article is "Young Adult Fiction's Online Commissars," on the Left's censorship of that genre in the name of "social justice." The content of the speech can cover a wide range of topics; it is its suppression that is usually *Quillette's* focus. So, for example, race, being a topic that is often suppressed by the Left, appears fairly frequently—not with the annoying "neural biodiversity" barely concealed racism of the "Dark Enlightenment," but rather following

the Jordan Peterson or Thomas Sowell dry, analytical approach. What is being said about race is less important to *Quillette* than defending the right of the speaker to speak.

But if you step back a little, you will see another connection among most of the articles that goes beyond simple calls for free speech. That is reality—the desire to acknowledge reality, and to push back against attempts to obfuscate reality, or, worse yet, remake it. This bias toward reality pushes *Quillette* toward the Right, whether they desire it or not, given that reality is an endangered species on the Left, and the only such species the Left actively encourages hunters to kill.

For example, because a major program of the Left currently is the attempt to destroy or deny the reality of sex differences, through the joint vehicles of a mutating definition of feminism and the ideology of transgenderism, topics connected to sex and gender crop up very frequently in the magazine. No doubt there will soon enough be a new Left anti-reality campaign seeking a new frontier, for the revolution can never end. (I have been predicting radical animal rights, aiming to erase the distinction between animals and humans, for a while, but am still waiting. And it looks like pedophilia may beat animal rights to the starting gate.) When that new campaign begins, if we do not first manage to put the Left on the back foot, *Quillette* will, if not stand athwart history, at least publish pieces that the Left finds distasteful, and so it will continued to be viewed by the Left as right-wing.

So that's what *Quillette* cares about. What does *Quillette* not care about? Anything that does not fit squarely within Agnostic Pragmatic Libertarianism, and quite a bit that does fit. Religion—atheism is frequently celebrated (Pinker and all the other New Atheists, and their hangers-on, either show up regularly or are open admirers of the magazine), but actual religion appears to be off limits, except to be criticized or dismissed as outdated. Abortion and related life issues such as euthanasia—an entire recent article on racist Virginia governor Ralph Northam managed to never once use the word “abortion,” or make any reference to his endorsement of infanticide. Limitations by the community or the state on sexual behavior. Guns. Economics in general; most notably, there is no J. D. Vance or Tucker Carlson here calling out the corporatist Right and Left. Fiscal policy. Immigration, in America or in Europe. International relations, except occasionally

as news. In other words, *Quillette* offers a daring-sounding, but very narrow, approach that has nothing in common with the concerns of most conservatives. Yes, to be fair, a few of these topics get a very occasional mention (along with fairly numerous quasi-political articles on academic topics)—but not in a way that is identifiable on the political spectrum. Thus, *Quillette* is only, in fact, opposed to the modern Left in a narrow, though important, portion of life.

In Agnostic Pragmatic Libertarianism, all transcendence is rejected, and a blend of relativism and utilitarianism offered wholesale. The renewal of men's souls or the encouragement of virtue, or even acknowledgement of virtue, is not on the agenda. As far as I can tell, every single editor or prominent writer for *Quillette* is an avowed atheist; Lehmann certainly is. One gets the distinct flavor that the *Quillette* circle, if they knew who he was (and he were alive), would regard Russell Kirk as a leprous Jeremiah, to be avoided at all costs—an embarrassment, like any social conservative. The one mention of Alasdair MacIntyre on the entire site is an attack on him. And so on. I cannot find, although perhaps I missed one, any favorable mention of any social conservative as social conservative. Those at *Quillette* think, and they are right, that it is very heterodox to point out that women, if given the choice, will at high rates choose traditionally female pursuits, instead of soldiering or foundry work. But they would be horrified at the idea that a well-run society would reject women's ability to choose either, because killing is not the *telos* of women and smelting iron is not an appropriate job for women. Unconstrained free choice is everything for Agnostic Pragmatic Libertarianism.

This flavor, of aggressive libertarianism which is necessarily antithetical to social conservatives, becomes even more pronounced when one moves outside the actual writing and focuses more on the people in *Quillette's* orbit. The magazine recently began a podcast. It also recently held its first social event, a large party in Toronto. Excerpts from speeches given there formed an episode of the podcast. Six people were featured; it seems fair to conclude that this mosaic is how *Quillette* wishes to present itself. No American conservative not libertarian would have found anything of much interest or resonance in the speeches, other than a general agreement on not suppressing speech. All would be horrified at, for example, editor Toby Young's suggestion on an earlier episode of

the podcast that the best way to solve the problems of the underclass is to offer them free impregnation with embryos chosen through IVF for genetic awesomeness—killing the rest, of course. And very few people still believe that the irritating Bill Kristol, who got his own whole podcast episode, is any kind of conservative at all.

Or, in order to examine someone with a more expansive public record than any of those formally associated with *Quillette*, let's take Dave Rubin. He hasn't published in the magazine; no surprise since his platform is YouTube. But he has close ties to many people who have and whom *Quillette* admires, and is regarded as the man who kickstarted much of this intellectual ferment on the Right. He does speaking tours with Jordan Peterson and he has hosted several of the *Quillette* stars, such as Christina Hoff Sommers, on his own show. Rubin describes himself as a classical liberal; he's smart, funny, and engaging, a happy warrior somewhat in the Reagan mold. I agree with him on a lot of immediate political issues. He seems like he'd be a fun guy to drink with.

The problem is that Rubin's view of life is not really compatible with my reactionary view of life, or with any conservative of any traditional stripe. He thinks abortion is just fine. He has a "husband." He thinks the Enlightenment is great. He just thinks we're slightly off track, and if we give ourselves a stiff double dose of *Aeropagitica* and John Stuart Mill, it will dispel the phantoms of identity politics and collectivist thought suppression, restoring America to the way it should be, a land of no limits. That is to say, Rubin buys fully into some Left campaigns (his thoughts on *Obergefell* and cake baking are a farrago of incoherence) and not into others. Where is the dividing line between people like him and people like me? It's pretty obvious—what they exalt is atomized individualism. All these people completely endorse the Enlightenment, and Left, idea that emancipation is the prime end of society, and the more emancipation, the more destruction of all unchosen bonds, the better. Their objection to today's Left is that in search of that emancipation, they have erected political correctness and groupthink, undermining the goal of ever more liberty. They emphasize equality less than the progressive Left, but they reject the same societal limits rejected by the Left. They just want those freedoms the Left wants to suppress to also remain unsuppressed; they are simply truer to the Enlightenment principles of atomized freedom, more left than the Left.

Thus, *Quillette* is, for many but not all purposes, indistinguishable from the Left. If Claire Lehmann were World Ruler and her sub-editors her World Lieutenants, it'd be better than a world run by the Davos Left, or by the Bernie Sanders Left, or the Antifa Left, but not by all that much, since we'd still be sprinting down the track into the brick wall that delimits the end of the Enlightenment experiment, just at different speeds in each case. Yes, we'd be less harassed and annoyed on the way, which is something. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*, and all that. But the wall will be just as hard in either case, and as they say of vertical speedy movement, it's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop.

I once had a friend who used to say, of the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "I forget six—but I remember the seventh, 'Begin With The End In Mind.'" That has stuck with me—begin with the end in mind. What is the end at which I aim? Victory, of course—the destruction and permanent incapacitation of the Left, and the creation of a new society, reactionary in the sense of being a new thing built with reference to the wisdom and experience of the past. An Augustan society with a Christian backbone, in sum, the outlines of which I have sketched in various places, and which is being fleshed out as we speak. (Implementation; there's the rub.) What, then, does *Quillette* offer on the path toward victory?

This is really the mirror image of a question I have dealt with at some length elsewhere, and intend to return to again. Of what use or profit, if any, are allies who are unsavory to others, but with whom you actually have some, or even much, common ground on specific political matters? It is not that *Quillette* is unsavory—what I mean is that I have roughly as much in common, in practice, with Claire Lehmann as I do with Richard Spencer, which is to say, not much. But in both cases we agree on some things, in ends if not in philosophy or even means.

It seems to me that the approach to achieve victory should therefore be like the Communists used in the old Popular Fronts. That is, close cooperation with those with whom you have something in common, while keeping in mind the need, if any real power is gained, to control certain crucial nodes (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior). And always keeping in mind the reality that the alliance with your new friends will someday have outlived its usefulness. Incompatible visions of the good cannot coexist as the spine of a society, so ultimately, one must form

the basis for the future. There can be only one, both as between Left and Right, and as between versions of the Right that cannot be reconciled.

But let us talk of now. In any reasonable strategy to achieve victory, the immediate goal must be breaking the power of the Left. One of their main superpowers today is complete control of the media that sets the Overton Window. That is, through their control of what the news and culture is permitted to be, they make it what they want. Even if our ultimate goals are different, *Quillette* has, I think, an important role to play in breaking this monopoly, and therefore should be strongly encouraged. If Claire Lehmann, directly or by inspiring other individuals or publications, can help drive a stake into the heart of the *New York Times*, as unlikely an event as that newspaper probably thinks it is, she will have done all of humanity a service, and I, for one, will both applaud and donate.