

The Shanker Chronicles – Season 1, Episode 1 – Polarization

Show Notes and Key Points from Dr. Shanker:

- Everywhere you look around the globe, societies are becoming more polarized.
- This got me thinking about my undergraduate days at Oxford where we were trained to be good liberal democratic thinkers.
- In our political theory class, we started off with Milton, then Mill, then Berlin
- Looking back on it, I would say they all shared a certain rationalist naivety
- Recognized how acrimonious political debate can be, but all presupposed that “common good”.
- A rational agent would recognize that it’s in their best long-term interests to accept the consensus and that it’s irrational to stay polarized.
- What they hadn’t anticipated wasn’t simply the consequence of polarization, but what’s more that political parties would quite deliberately seek to cultivate polarization.
- Not simply to get power, but to subvert the government in power, with messaging designed to provoke polarization.
- Benefits of polarization:
 - Basic instinct to band together in face of fear or anger
 - Can’t process what opposite side is saying
 - Reality-based thinking
 - All-or-nothing emotions
- Bewailing how polarized we’ve become is a way of affirming for political parties how successful they’ve been.
- Angry tweet works both ways: whether you’re for or against, you’re polarized.
- Not just to obtain power: Undermine ability of opposite side to govern.
- Prosocial emotions make us band together, but the discovery of modern times.

- *Facebook’s ranking algorithm treated emoji reactions as five times more valuable than “likes,” internal documents reveal. The theory was simple: Posts that prompted lots of reaction emoji tended to keep users more engaged, and keeping users engaged was the key to Facebook’s business*

- Stop and consider how many of the messages today play on fear and anger
- Strange thing is, two sides may not be all that far apart when it comes to governing.
- Headline from CNN
 - *“Tuesday [Virginia and NJ] elections showed that the US is a more moderate and centrist country than activists on either the right or the left let on”*
- Political reality vs electoral messaging.
- Costs of polarization: chronic anxiety.
- More anxious we are, easier to trigger anger.
- Cost of all this anxiety and anger: stuck on bottom right Thayer.

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