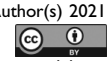
Review

EJPT

European Journal of Political Theory
2024, Vol. 23(1) 125–131



DOI: 10.1177/14748851211048457
journals.sagepub.com/home/ept


Perils of party

Paul Sagar
King's College London, London

Max Skjönsberg, *The Persistence of Party: Ideas of Harmonious Discord in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge University Press, 2021; 373 pp.: £75.

In this excellent book Max Skjönsberg sets out to examine the rise of the idea of – and possible justification for – party in eighteenth century Britain. Following the establishment of mass suffrage, representative democracy, and of politics being permanently organised in terms of government-versus-opposition, the presence of political parties has widely come to be seen as integral to modern democratic societies. But how this became so is a story that begins in the eighteenth century, even if the transformations that made it permanent occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth. Skjönsberg sets out to examine the earlier story, and in particular of how the idea of *party* came to be differentiated from the idea of *faction* – the former being essentially acceptable, perhaps even to be welcomed, the latter something to be reviled, discouraged, and if possible, eliminated, insofar as it was a threat to the stability and even survival of a constitutional order. This distinction between party as essentially good and faction as essentially bad was of course immortalised by Edmund Burke in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, and from the start Skjönsberg is clear that this is where he is taking us. But as he shows throughout, the road to Burke was complex and contested, and a great deal of thought (not to mention real-world events) had to be offered by earlier thinkers in order for Burke to get there. Skjönsberg to this end advertises that his narrative will follow John Dunn's dictum that 'the history of political thought is best when it is Whig regarding subject matter and Tory regarding truth' (6). His book adheres to this maxim diligently, and with admirable results.

There are now well over 100 titles in Cambridge University Press's *Ideas in Context* series, under which Skjönsberg's book appears, and it deserves the label even more than most For this is a work which takes seriously not just what philosophers, historians, and pamphleteers had to *say* about party and faction in eighteenth century Britain, but what those parties and factions were actually doing. This is no mean feat, for the history of this period is enormously complex. As Skjönsberg shows, even a presumptively basic

Corresponding author:
Paul Sagar, King's College London, London.
Email: paul.sagar@kcl.ac.uk

distinction between court and country is belied by complexity given the shifting allegiances and identities of such groups, and the way that politics following the Hanoverian ascension was inflected through patterns of loyalty and patronage for those deemed faithful to the protestant succession. Lurking in the background was the prospect of Jacobitism, either as a vague potential preference for those out of royal favour, or as a full-blown commitment to returning the Stuart line, which alarmingly took on very real dimensions in the so-called 'Forty-Five' (i.e. the 1745-6 Jacobite rebellion). Then there is the emergence of the labels of Tory vs. Whig, which offers only more complexity insofar as the Whigs were usually divided between those inside and outside of the ministry, whilst Tories, usually in opposition, were suspected (sometimes fairly) of Jacobitism, to the point where the term 'Tory' became by mid-century a slur disavowed by all, before its later re-emergence as a respectable sobriquet that would, in the next century, become synonymous with the modern Conservative Party. All of this took place against the background of the Act of Union of 1707, in which Scotland became constitutionally integrated with England's system of government. On top of all that there was the further vexing, and to its participants deeply important, question of religion, which was often crucial to determining and sustaining political allegiance (as well, more often than not, of fierce suspicion and rivalry). Where one stood across the spectrum from Anglicanism to the varieties of Dissent (both Protestant and Catholic) greatly influenced where one found one's political friends and foes.

Against this complex background, the evolution of which Skjönsberg charts throughout his evolving narrative of ideas, *The Persistence of Party* examines how leading eighteenth century observers sought to understand and evaluate the rise of organised party opposition. Yet given the trauma of Britain's seventeenth century experiences – i.e. descent into civil war due to the ravages of domestic political in-fighting – the stakes were perceived as exceptionally high. The basic problem is not hard to grasp, after all. A constitutional order needs a base level of unity amongst all participants if it is not to implode. If opposing sides come to see each other not merely as antagonists who disagree about particulars, but as implacable enemies who cannot be reasoned or compromised with, then disaster looms. One proven way to eliminate this problem in the period was absolute monarchy: under such a system, there *can* be no party or faction, because it is a prerequisite of political participation that all express allegiance and loyalty to the decisions of the monarch. But Britain had decisively rejected any such solution with Parliament's victory in the Civil War, and even after the Restoration of Charles II it was understood by all sides that Britain's constitutional settlement was one based on freedom of political allegiance and participation. Yet such freedom – as richly celebrated as it was by Britons themselves – might contain the seeds of its own destruction. The freedom to form political oppositions and allegiances risked spiralling out of control, leading to the destruction of the very constitutional order that permitted such freedom in the first place. Or so leading observers feared, and wondered in turn about how to mitigate.

Skjönsberg begins his narrative of ideas with Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, an exiled French Huguenot who spent time in England following the Declaration of the Edict of Nantes, at several points fighting for William of Orange, and who came to write a 10-volume history

of England (albeit one written in French, composed in Germany, and printed in the Dutch republic). This history sought in part to trace the origins and nature of party division in Britain, and Rapin's conclusion was that whilst the parties of Great Britain were an evil, they were most likely a *necessary* one. As Skjönsberg puts it, 'Rapin disliked party division and…his defence of the British party structure was strictly a 'lesser evil' argument' (because trying to get rid of party would mean having to get rid of the British free constitution). 'Even so, it was momentous', because this marked a move away from simply condemning party and faction as diseases within the body politics that would ideally be eliminated entirely, towards seeing them (to use more recent parlance) as a feature of the British political order rather than a bug (68).

Skjönsberg's next chapter offers a major piece of revisionist interpretation, tackling the thought of Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke has hitherto been seen as an implacable opponent of party, one who advocated 'a party to end all parties' in a utopian vision according to which all sides would rally behind the rule of a 'patriot king'. But as Skjönsberg shows this reading of Bolingbroke is defective, being overly-reliant on partial readings of his *The Idea of a Patriot King*, deracinated from its crucial intellectual and practical context as well as Bolingbroke's other writings. As Skjönsberg convincingly reads him, Bolingbroke in fact operated a distinction between party as ultimately sensitive and responsive to the national interest, whereas faction was entirely sectional and preoccupied only with the advancement of its members (84). In turn, Skjönsberg reads Bolingbroke's interventions *not* as an attempt to advocate for a utopian abolition of parties, but instead as a carefully crafted insistence of the need for principled Tory opposition to the Whig ministry, and Walpole in particular, during the early Hanoverian period. Skjönsberg's Bolingbroke advocates for the Tories to act as principled national *party* – crucially, not faction – whose job is to oppose the King's ministry in a spirit of national betterment. Whereas factions struggled only for power, parties ought to struggle for principle. And insofar as the Tories acted out of the principle of commitment to checking the Whig ministry in the name of constitutional stability and order, then they were not only to be welcomed, but took up a role that needed to be maintained and preserved. In other words, Bolingbroke was articulating an embryonic version of the idea of *loyal opposition*, i.e. of party as a permanent feature in a free constitution that needed internal checking and balancing, not a utopian and hence entirely unrealistic unanimity of purpose.

The middle chapters of *The Persistence of Party* are given over to extensive analysis of Hume's reflections on party and faction (terms Hume continued to use interchangeably), both in his political essays and the monumental 6-volume *History of England.* Although Hume's thought on party has begun to garner sustained attention[1], Skjönsberg's study represents by far the most detailed and comprehensive treatment to date. Dedicating three and half chapters to Hume's thought might seem excessive, but it is justified, and for the reasons Skjönsberg gives: that Hume took more seriously than anyone before (and perhaps since) the intractable difficulty of explaining party as not just a historical phenomenon in the British context, but as an outgrowth of human psychology, and the way it gets inflected through conflicts not just of interest, but of what we would now call ideology, most especially in conjunction with religious disagreement. After all, 'If human

beings had *only* been motivated by Epicurean self-interest, and were not prone to seduction by speculative principles and enthusiasm, human affairs would have been more predictable. Alas, most were not and such a scenario played no part in Hume's political thought' (328).

Hume recognised that party was inevitable in a free constitution, and that any attempt to eliminate it would either fail, or lead to the destruction of the very freedom which generated the problem of party in the first place. But party was a problem insofar as the growing animosity between different political and religious groupings, in the context of overbearing Whig bullishness due to prolonged preferential treatment by George I and II, had the potential to plunge Britain back into the calamities of the previous century. At the heart of the issue was that whilst Britain's free constitution naturally split along court vs. country lines (there would always be a party of the King's ministry, and always a party opposed, such was the inevitable and reasonable disagreement of interests and ideas between winners and losers of the day), the present arraignment of (factions of) Whigs and Tories did not map onto the 'natural' court vs country split. This was due to myriad compounding factors. Religion in particular tended to cement and also exacerbate political opposition along historically contingent, but now firmly entrenched, lines. Similarly, the legacy of the Hanoverian settlement and the persistent appeal of Jacobitism to those who perceived themselves as having lost out from that settlement was a further aggravating factor. On top of this, confused speculative system of philosophy entrenched party opposition along intellectually unjustifiable, but rhetorically powerful, lines. Whigs spouted nonsense about an original contract, whilst Tories disingenuously harped about the need for passive obedience. In addition, all sides believed fairy tales about British history. Whigs espoused the fantasy of an 'ancient constitution', preposterously suggesting this had been restored via the 1688 deposing of James II. Tories had a point that the Stuart kings were subjected to unjust and unfair treatment by their Parliamentary opponents, but were deluded if they could not see that the shifts of power and property in England necessitated a permanent move to a mixed constitution, with Parliament the dominant political force by the late seventeenth century.

Against all of this Hume urged the parties to see that much of what they disagreed about was overblown, the product of the psychology of factional tribalism and mistaken principles leading them to overestimate their differences. His aim was ultimately moderation: to lower the temperature and thus promote a system in which party remained – as was inevitable under a free constitution – but ceased to present a threat. Hume 'wanted to "persuade men not to contend as if they were fighting *pro aris & focis*, and change a good constitution into a bad one, by the violence of their factions"…[he] was neither arguing against Court and Country distinctions nor party per se'. What he tried to do instead was align party disagreement along appropriate – and constitutionally stable – metrics, because 'the two sides were frequently not as far apart as they purported to be' (137).

A detour sees Skjönsberg take us through the contemporaneously influential (at least for a period) pamphleteering of John Brown, who advocated a position closer to the caricature of Bolingbroke earlier done away with. That is, of imagining a free constitution in which party was entirely eliminated. As Skjönsberg highlights, what makes Brown's position historically notable is in part precisely the fact that none of the major thinkers

he otherwise considers thought such a position worth entertaining. The intellectual thinness of Brown's vision, and speed with which it was subsequently forgotten, indicate that by the latter half of the eighteenth century the serious intellectual action was firmly elsewhere.

At which point, enter Burke, the other central figure (alongside Hume) in Skjönsberg's narrative. The four and a half chapters devoted to Burke represent some of the most dense and ambitious aspects of the whole book. That is no criticism; the material here simply *is* dense, and can only be handled ambitiously. For as is plain, Burke's status not just as an observer of party politics, but an active participant in the party conflicts and developments of his own day, radically complicates any assessment of his contributions. He was, after all, both theorist and practitioner of party. Nonetheless, the core of Skjönsberg's meticulous and detailed reconstruction of Burke's thought on party is that the Irishman, in coming to put front and centre a distinction between party and faction, completed a process of intellectual development begun with Rapin, and forwarded through Bolingbroke and Hume. Burke took the decisive step beyond Hume in *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* by extending his earlier arguments in *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* that whilst faction was an evil, party might not just be a form of necessary evil, but something qualitative different: an asset to the free constitutional order, to be welcomed as such.

In this regard, Burke emerges as closer to Bolingbroke than has hitherto been realised. For what separated faction from party was commitment to *principle*, not simply to the forwarding of the interests of one's own group. (Skjönsberg suggests open endorsement of such a principle only really became possible once Jacobitism had fully exited the stage, hence in part why earlier writers couldn't make this step.) Burke's own political grouping, the Rockingham Whigs, arguably exemplified precisely this, by refusing to take positions in the King's ministry insofar as doing so would mean having to abandon the commitments they held, and instead opting to remain in opposition (and in Burke's case, effective political wilderness for most of his career). Party on this view represented not a mere necessary evil, but a commendable dynamic in which commitment to something above sectional advancement ensured that principled opposition to the ministry of the day might be maintained, with the effect of balancing and checking the power of Crown-in-Parliament in a robust and stabilising manner. Again, whilst the language and idea of a loyal opposition – which has subsequently become central to the functioning of democratic, party-based, political structures as we now know them – was not yet available to Burke, it was nonetheless emergent by the close of the eighteenth century.

Or at least, might more clearly have been recognised, if it were not for the seismic upheavals set in motion by the French Revolution. For as Skjönsberg shows, that event had dramatic implications both for the intellectual coherence, as well as the practical liveability, of Burke's idea of party from principle being a welcome feature of a free constitutional order. The essential problem for Burke was that he viewed events in France not – as most of his fellow Whig contemporaries did – as a welcome liberation of the oppressed from the chains of their oppressors, but as the unleashing of political forces that would peck into dust the foundations of the kind of political society required to enable the liberty and equality that the revolutionaries claimed to be acting in the name of. By contrast,

most of his Whig colleagues – under the somewhat reluctant leadership of Charles James Fox – embraced the Revolution and its putative principles, and styled their political identity, their own principles, in line with supporting it. This Burke could not abide. But where did that leave his theory of party? What if the principle that the party espouses is one incompatible with constitutional stability at home and abroad? What if parties from principle turn out, in certain circumstances, to be more dangerous than factions?

This, in other words, is the modern problem of ideology, of the transmutation of religious enthusiasm into a secular setting. We, today, know just how disastrous this phenomenon may prove. Burke had no good answer to the threats ideological enthusiasm posed (does anybody?), and as his own famous split with Fox, and his later, troubled, shift towards the governing party of Pitt the Younger, 'demonstrated' it was something he experienced as a deeply personal, as well as intellectual, predicament. (As Emily Jones has shown, the subsequent transmutation of Burke into 'the founding father of conservatism' is a story unto itself about the distorting effects of ideology.[2]) In many ways, it remains our predicament today: what does one do when one's own party of principle becomes wedded to principles one cannot support, but where no other party seems to offer anything better, and when the stakes are increasingly high? By the close of the eighteenth century, the problem was emerging clearly into view, even if a solution was not. Skjönsberg masterfully shows how things reached that point.

All historical studies are, to some degree, influenced by the times that the historian herself happens to write in. This is especially true of political history. Skjönsberg demonstrates how this was undoubtedly so for Rapin and Hume. However, it is also true of Skjönsberg (how could it not be?). We live at a time when the ravages of party strife have grown increasingly troubling, more so than for many decades. On the one hand, of course, our strife is very different to that of the eighteenth century: mass suffrage and representative democracy have permanently changed the dynamics of parties in politics between now and then. Even in America, the dimension of religion is now radically different from any eighteenth century analogue, even if the leakage of contemporary American cultural neuroses seems bizarrely proficient at infecting foreign political cultures, whose very different socio-political histories ought to render them more immune than they seem in fact to be.

Nonetheless, Skjönsberg's study points us in the direction of subtle continuities in what is, ultimately, the human condition, without trying to teleport answers out of the past into the present. His book reminds us of the inevitability of politics as being organised tribally due to the psychology of its actors, as well as their conflicts over interests. It points to the difficulty of balancing freedom with the need to constrain that freedom for its own good (what Hume called 'authority'). It helps us remain alert to the dangers that lurk if we fail to find ways to channel party so as to lower, rather than raise, the temperature. Skjönsberg's title is thus well chosen. Whilst he does not pretend that the eighteenth century will somehow magic up answers for the twenty-first, he rightly encourages us to take on board a key lesson of the eighteenth century: that party *will* persist. That is likely, then as now, to prove both a blessing and a curse.

Whilst remaining appropriately cautious about attempting to draw contemporary lessons from his historical study, Skjönsberg nonetheless ends by striking an explicitly Humean

note: that when it comes to party conflict 'we must also ensure that the debate remains civil', with the aspiration that our ultimate allegiance be to what Hume called 'the *party* of humankind' (334-5). Alas, how this might actually be achieved remains as difficult to convincingly articulate – in theory, and even more so in practice – today as it was in the eighteenth century. Like Hume, Skjönsberg urges moderation on all sides, in an effort to secure the benefits of a Burkean distinction between the advantages of party, whilst avoiding the ravages of faction. Yet moderation is currently in acutely short supply. It is no critique of Skjönsberg to note that reading Hume and Burke (or any other eighteenth century writer) is not going to provide the answer to our current problems, not least because moderation is something that requires repeat lived instantiation, not mere intellectual reflection. Nonetheless, an accurate diagnosis of the nature of the problems being faced cannot be a bad first step. To that end, Skjönsberg has performed a most valuable service.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Paul Sagar https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8076-7927

Notes

1. E.g. Joel Landis, 'Whither Parties? Hume on Partisanship and Political Legitimacy', *American Political Science Review* 112:2 (2018); Paul Sagar, 'Between Virtue and Knavery: Hume on the Politics of Moderation', *Journal of Politics* 83:3 (2021).
2. Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).