Feature Articles

DOUBTING CULTURE WARS

Jonathan B. Imber

mong intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, Athe theme of "culture wars" has become symbolic of titanic struggles within and among major institutions. When James Davison Hunter published his widely cited book, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America a decade ago, it was hardly difficult to identify the problem of the excluded middle in his provocative thesis about the struggle between the "progressives" and the "orthodox" over then many politically volatile issues. Yet the major incentive for pursuing further empirical research about this volatility was due to his conceptual boldness and the originality of his thesis, which Rhys H. Williams and his collaborators examined in Culture Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth in 1997. Hunter's important work was, in the spirit of open inquiry, criticized, and as Williams noted in his introduction to Culture Wars in American Politics, the range of response to Hunter's general thesis had already resulted in various attempts to explain these struggles in other terms. For example, traditionalists were said to be at odds with "new class" knowledge workers; egotism was said to be drowning out all expressions of altruism, indicating the underlying impetus for such works as Bowling Alone by Robert Putnam; and identity politics, particularly sexual and racial, were fragmenting the older and presumably more united left-wing coalitions.

Hunter's thesis, deriving in large part from his earlier and innovative work on religion in American life, was criticized for giving too much credence to media attention of elites and not enough to the larger sources of consensus already established in the modern welfare state among the mass of citizens. The once highly charged debate over abortion illustrates the elite *kulturkampf*, while public opinion has remained

largely opposed to it but also largely open to exceptions. And it is important to recognize that murdering physicians who perform abortions cannot be debated with disinterest. That is to say, whatever the motivation or rationale for such vigilantism may be, arguments against abortion may not, without losing their moral force among a broader public, appeal to any means possible for stopping it. Still, opposition to and support for abortion rights can be civil. The slander against abortion opponents by calling them complicit in the murder of physicians is no more persuasive than trading on the Holocaust to condemn abortion itself. Indeed, the willingness to disagree civilly while seeking ways to persuade, short of violence, is part of what the present consensus about abortion means.

The pursuit of consensus in the social sciences is important to revisit regularly in what appears now to be a waning of the larger and more publicized cultural struggles that Hunter and others identified. Even the urgency about "political correctness" has dissipated, but it should not be assumed that with a decline in symptoms that certain underlying problems do not exist related to cultural struggle. Whether we bowl alone or just get along better because we bowl alone only provides a surface description of personal and public boundaries about our lives together. Our present optimists of ameliorative practices of "live and let live" may have to consider a modified version of Ambrose Bierce's definition of peace: "In international affairs, a period of cheating between two periods of fighting." In a time of reduced cultural struggle, conflicting worldviews appear like ships passing in the night, but only because we say so.

I will lay out a brief argument about two ways to think about culture sociologically in an effort

to define the enduring nature of cultural struggle beyond the present optimism about moral pluralism. The first way is taken from my long-standing interest in the writings of Philip Rieff whose development and analysis of the idea of culture has deeply enriched subsequent debates about the idea of culture conflict. In 1968, Rieff published an essay entitled "Cooley and Culture," using the occasion of celebrating the life and work of Charles Horton Cooley to formulate a rudimentary distinction in a theory of culture. He wrote, "Every culture system organizes the tension of two types of thought-worlds, one type technological and the other religious. There are two ways to mend a canoe, to keep it afloat, rendering existence on the water both possible and ordinary; all this is a part of technology. There must also be ways to 'mend' what is directly not yet mendable—death, for example. To do so is obviously the task of religion."

Rieff proposed to call everything that falls within some technological thought-world, "minimal culture" and everything that falls within some religious thought-world "maximal culture". He attributed to the ideas of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, among others, the advocacy of an increasingly powerful and influential minimal culture, leading to his observation that "Our civilization is rapidly producing what is in effect a cultural lumpen proletariat of unsophisticated therapeutic types, intensely demanding beneficiaries of the sheer plenitude, material and otherwise, promised by the folklore, the popular thought-world of technology." At the same time, these same theorists acknowledged what Emile Durkheim and others regarded as the social functions of religion, which could be identified and applied strategically to the maintenance of social order. Rieff remarked, "Maximal culture has finally become what some sociological theorists in the nineteenth century conceived it to be: a means for the maintenance of social order, not the level from which that order can be judged and reordered." And he concluded, in 1968, with the following observation on the fate of maximal culture: "In the culture of the therapeutic, inherited criteria of good and bad, right and wrong, are dissolved into the new criteria of well and ill, interesting and uninteresting; there is psychology where there used to be religion, morality, and custom."

The Cognitive Right and Left

The distinction between minimal and maximal culture holds to the present moment, perhaps more so than in 1968, before all politics became local and before utopian ambition defined by existential choice became personal ambition defined by career path. Within the realm of minimal culture, the explanatory powers of how things work grind on, turning the human genome, for example, into a fantastic and ongoing press release, unrelenting in its reshaping of expectations about human destiny. Such insights make little use of unwieldy claims from maximal culture about such destiny, there being no "meaning to it all" necessary to understand genetic fate. Culture, in the maximal sense, is thus epiphenomenal to explanations of human motivation, action, and, finally, social order. At the other end of the continuum are those who consider a functional, maximal culture the reigning explanatory model in all that is human.

The aims of minimal and maximal culture are informed by explanatory powers that I will call the cognitive right and the cognitive left. I mean to use these terms heuristically, as a way of discovering more about culture conflict, and my aim is to delineate two broad tendencies in how those politically inclined to the left or the right think about general causation on many matters, though, certainly not all the same way on all matters. The cognitive right examines a presumed range of controls on human action that are determined by biological and thus evolutionary features that are said to be common in some ways to all living things. In Rieff's terms, the cognitive right, insofar as it directs the popular understanding of human action, represents the triumph of minimal culture. At the same time, broader explanations of human behavior (e.g., group behavior) that move from "how" to "why" illuminate a functional, maximal culture. For many reasons, some like to refer to evolutionary explanations as having little or nothing to do with human culture at all, but the hostility, as we will see, is largely to certain types of religious explanation, that is, a maximal culture, of the critical as distinct from functional

On the other hand, the cognitive left upholds what Durkheim termed the ineffable *sui generis*, that is, that aspect of the social which acts upon the social and which is said to be greater than the sum of its parts. For many reasons, some like to refer to this as having much, if not everything,

to do with culture, and they mean it in both the functional and critical, maximal senses. Minimal culture, from the cognitive left, is what capitalism is conceived to be, that is the mindless pursuit of more without maximal reasons for why more is better, except for those who have more. The cognitive left draws its energy from a powerful envy that it would eliminate, while the cognitive right sees that envy as constitutive of and constructive to social order itself.

It is now a well-worn fact of our academic silliness that the staid, demographic categories of class, race, and sex serve as ideological hammers and nails in the periodic crucifixions of dissenters from the pieties of the allegedly horrible realities of class inequality, racism, and sexism. I need not deny the existence of such realities to remain at least skeptical about what can be generalized from their empirical representations. An exemplary, paranoid generalization that admits nothing in the way of empirical skepticism can be found in Donald M. Lowe's The Body in Late-Capitalist USA, published by the most advanced cognitive left publisher in the world, Duke University Press: "Racism is not a single, discrete, isolatable item, nor is it the result of a conspiracy. It is always, already present everywhere in the Social." (1995:111). The stylists of such pronouncements add the further sight-gag of capitalizing the "s" in social, so as to give it that sui generis ineffability already mentioned. The phrase, "always, already present everywhere," is also a piety of anti-positivism. The effacement of the particular precludes any consensus about what counts as evidence, much less what follows from it. There is considerable seepage of this kind of piety into the kangaroo courts that have been held in many colleges and universities over the last two decades. This was illustrated in Richard Bernstein's important 1994 book, Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future.

The sociologist Joan Moore wrote in 1990 that "Any academic who is not white, male, and middle-aged knows that the moment he or she stands in front of a class, a portion of the class expects something that will illuminate their place in the social structure. This is a constituency. It is not a public. The woman or minority sociologist feels instant pressure to act as a social critic.... I cannot say this strongly enough. It is not possible for a woman or minority sociologist to walk into a classroom in modern America and not face in-

stantly and squarely the twin issues of equality and poverty, which I submit, cover many of the issues that public intellectuals purport to address" (229). Such phrases as "instant pressure" "face instantly and squarely" speak to a decided loss of disinterest in the purposes of teaching and learning. Yet, there is something poignant about this, about the *sui generis* reality of one's racial, ethnic, or sexual status in relation to one's motives and actions and others' expectations about them.

These two examples may be taken as simple illustrations of the vagaries of political correctness. The problem with political correctness as an analytical idea is that those who condemn it use it more for accusatory and adversarial purposes rather than to clarify what is going on. Social scientists should be thinking more about and examining theoretically and empirically what is going on. Lowe and Moore are poster people of the cognitive left. They lay special claim on the essential nature of their own cultural determinations. The cognitive-left analysis stipulates the ascribed status of such things as race and sex, but these are not biological categories in the older sociological renderings of ascribed status. They are instead first and foremost experiential categories of identity. What is more, if you have not had the experience that Moore describes, you are not yet fully awake. In this way, the idea of false consciousness returns not as an instrument to challenge the "white, male and middle-aged" self-concept (that, apparently, is a hopeless endeavor) but rather to re-educate, at best, those whose status is designated as oppressed. Marx contended that the proletariat was already converted to be revolutionary by virtue of its station and that the bourgeoisie could not be because class consciousness defined identity as well as action. Marx's alleged determinism did provide the generational trapdoor that would allow the children of the bourgeoisie to become revolutionary in some manner. Yet cognitive-left sentimentalists of cultural essentialism do not take it for granted that those who belong in their thought-world, by ascribed status, have been converted.

Cultural essentialism imposes on each particular self a group consciousness that is always, already present everywhere. It is a form of determinism so powerful today that it seems likely we will have to wait for sometime before its logical inconsistencies are recognized and popularized. The principal inconsistency is free will, something that even Marx allowed in his limited choice of

types of consciousness. Social orders in which free will has been deeply suppressed are not unknown, but we have been accustomed since the rise of totalitarianism to assume that these suppressions are political and that they require a police state to maintain. What would it mean to say they are also cultural, as Orwell understood when he noted the political effectiveness of manipulating the meaning of words? The political totalitarian had all the means of power, including violence, at his disposal. The cultural totalitarian operates from the experience of frustration at the status quo, taking the struggle directly to the schools and the media. The producers of popular culture rail against the regulators of culture, with the First Amendment serving as the fig leaf to an otherwise naked ambition to smash what are taken to be the false idols of maximal culture: religion, morality, and custom.

The problem with smashing idols is that they must be replaced with some way of explaining why the world is the way it is. It is this replacement which is struggling to be born. That is to say, the process by which cultural authority establishes itself is never set once and for all, but the shifting contents or directives that define what is or is not permitted are communicated effectively or not. The reason so much attention has been paid to all forms of public media and popular culture is that it is there where the debate about effective communication is most controversial and perhaps irresolvable. One of the virtues of the cognitive left is its wholesale endorsement of strategies and programs that inevitably keep the wheels of commerce turning—there are literally hundreds of associations, professional and therapeutic, whose raison d'être is to tinker with nearly everything but common sense. Often those who act out most capriciously or least attractively—who claim to be leaders —find themselves more often than not hanging out on various limbs, casting blame at everything and everyone for their failure of being noticed and rewarded. Imagining themselves as charismatic, they are in fact paranoid, as Philip Rieff defined the pathological side of charisma. This pathology advanced by illiterate and politically naïve leaders in higher education and the media has reaped what it has sown, so much so that students and media audiences have begun to catch on to the scam, leading protest after protest about their littlest problems and testifying endlessly about how they have been cheated, abused, and generally unappreciated. Cognitive-left thinking, which forbids the blaming of the victim, opens upon a landscape of frenetic positioning for position, each according to his need.

At the other end of the continuum, the cognitive right occupies a much smaller, but much more controversial, place in academic and public life. Evolutionary psychology, formerly sociobiology, has developed a larger public reputation, partly off-setting the momentum of endless grievance that has come to define so much of the cognitive left. Blaming the victim is cleverly avoided by attributing the cause of currently defined "problems" not to cultural or historical circumstances, usually no more than a few generations in duration, but to the longer frame of "species-time." A particularly controversial example of this kind of thinking, arose with the publication last year of A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion by Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer. Reviewed in *The New Republic*, the book was strongly criticized for the absence of any mention of culture in the kinds of generalization that conclude that women's post-rape trauma is an adaptive function that enables them to cope with their loss of control of their own evolved ability to choose the best mate or to retain the trust of their present mate, or that rape increases reproduction, giving the most aggressive males the chance to continue their line. The reviewer, Jerry A. Coyne, who teaches in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University Chicago, argued against the coherence of such claims rather than appealing to audience sensitivity. On culture, Coyne predicted: "Flies and ducks do not create, and live in, a culture, as humans do; and human culture guarantees that there will be many meaningless parallels between the behavior of humans and of other species" (p. 30, April 3, 2000).

What Coyne apparently wanted to establish was that the parallels drawn between the way animals and humans behave can be of only limited use in understanding the pervasive nature of human culture itself. There is something to be said for this insofar as it is a statement about causality, whether we generalize from saccharin in mice or genes in ducks. But it is possible that Coyne shares much in common with his renegade colleagues over this idea about the function of culture, seeing how much it represents a kind of repository of infinite meanings, some linked to biological understanding but most not. To have to *deny* that flies and ducks do not create and

live in a culture as humans do could be taken as evidence that biologists, and now their counterparts in evolutionary psychology, assume that human culture is mostly meaningless so far as scientific generalization goes. Whereas the cognitive left has made subjectivity an abyss, the cognitive right does everything it can to eliminate what in effect is the bias of consciousness and its creations, those aspects of human existence that are often remarked as most unique to it.

Some call this reductionism. It is also a fundamental attribute of the cognitive right. Reductionism is a way of defining the origins of more determinative forces in what motivates and thereby guides human beings. The old instinct theorists along with Freud should all be assigned to the cognitive right. From this end of the continuum, culture may be present, but it is not omnipresent and certainly not sui generis. The anthropology of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, which brought the recognition of cultural differences to several generations of social science, stood tenuously on the borderline between the cognitive left and right. The clearer emergence of what came to be called "cultural relativism" acquired political uses far beyond the distinctive anthropological insights about the "relatively" autonomous and indigenous dynamics of societies that had yet to be transformed by contact. "Contact" now remains only appropriate with humans meeting aliens, that is, literally off-earth life forms that possess intelligence, gentle or destructive, depending on whether one enjoys the upside of the end of scarcity or the downside of our becoming the staple of someone else's diet. The fate of cultural relativism is something akin to fission, where, finally, each individual is culturally relative to every other individual, forbidding biological explanations for personality disorder at precisely the same time that medication for depression is most endemic.

"The Darwinization of Everything"

The cognitive right maintains a certain and useful indifference to individual outcome. But lately the entire reasoning behind group outcome has also come under intense scrutiny. The admixture of identity politics and individual grievance has produced two versions of response to how and why people end up where they do. From the cognitive left, a strong alliance of identity with the group has inspired all egalitarian demands about future outcome, while from the cognitive

right, an equally strong alliance of identity with the group has been used to justify present conditions. It is no coincidence, in this regard, that it is now nearly impossible to talk about human nature on the cognitive left, a subject of considerable social-scientific investigation historically, because it tends to produce status quo assessments of conflict (e.g., the inevitability of war) and cooperation (e.g., rational choice). At the same time, the psychometricians, with their battery of comparative assessments, conceal a deep admiration for the status quo while disclaiming pretensions to influence public policy.

On the cognitive right, a principal formulator of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology, E.O. Wilson, has felt the full gale of reactions to such ideas over the years. Jerry Coyne in the previously referred to review in The New Republic claims that the larger goal of such works on rape is "the engulfment of social science and social policy by the great whale of evolutionary psychology." He goes on, "This attempted takeover is not new. It was first suggested in 1978 in E.O.Wilson's On Human Nature, and more recently in his Consilience, Wilson extended the program to nearly every area of human thought, including aesthetics and ethics. We are witnessing a new campaign for the Darwinization of Everything" (p. 33).

The Darwinization of Everything resonates with "Racism is always, already present everywhere in the Social." The progress of original sin may very well be its bifurcation into two modes of explanation at a time when maximal culture exclusively achieves functional, if not critical, purposes. In criticizing E.O. Wilson's effort to resolve this bifurcation in explanatory powers, Coyne directs us to consider Wilson's strategy more specifically.

The word consilience was coined in 1840 by the English natural philosopher, William Whewell, (1794-1866). Whewell was a contemporary of far better remembered figures today, such as T.H. Huxley, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, and Michael Farraday. Consilience is defined as "concurrence or accordance in inferential results." In other words, generalizations from different disciplines and fields are found to be related from widely differing inductions. All particulars lead to the same whole. There is a long philosophical tradition that has examined this, from Aristotle, to Francis Bacon, to John Stuart Mill. What is important to keep in mind is that Wilson is a consummate inductivist.

In 1867, Edward Livingston Youmans edited a book, The Culture Demanded by Modern Life, in which Whewell, along with his contemporaries just mentioned contributed essays. Whewell's posthumous contribution, entitled "On the Influence of the History of Science upon Intellectual Education," in title alone, acknowledged that there were then, as remains the case today, two types of education: one from below and the other from above. The one from below, the school of hard knocks, is not unknown to Wilson whose many biographical sound bites, include mention of his fabulous climb up the intellectual and status ladders of American life, toward inclusion in that rarest and most publicly self-conscious of pantheons of highest education, Harvard University. But when it comes to academic success, the survival of the fittest does not entirely explain where we hungry souls end up in life. Other forces that have been personified along with nature, such as good and bad luck, agreeable and disagreeable character, helpful and unhelpful mentors, go some distance in providing answers of sorts, too.

In Wilson's account of his Southern Baptist upbringing in Alabama, "laid backward under the water on the sturdy arm of a pastor," the religious impulse itself is recreated in the image of Science, which becomes for the evolutionist "religion liberated and writ large" (p. 6). Like Freud and Durkheim, Wilson has found a "purpose" for religion, which is not the same as finding a purpose in life and measuring oneself against it. Unlike Freud, Wilson preaches a kinder and gentler end to human uncertainty and anxiety, something that the sociologist Howard Kaye has remarked upon in decisive ways over the past fifteen years. Wilson leaves the old fundamentalists, those inheritors of critical, maximal culture, standing more or less helplessly all along their watchtowers. In their place, from his ivory tower, he appears to find alliances with the post-religious fundamentalists who are environmentalists, postmodernists, feminists, and others who inhabit a disproportionate quantity of guilt-tripping space in higher education today. (Wilson's efforts to curry favor among the avant garde of intellectual trendiness are worth comparing to a similar effort made more than a decade ago by Stephen Toulmin in his work Cosmopolis.)

Education from above now dictates the virtues of "spirituality" over and against "religiosity" in the elite academy, and for good reason: no inspired religious leadership has led the most prestigious

schools for several generations, but the adolescent biological reality of who regularly inhabits the schools in the greatest numbers has remained virtually unchanged for two thousand years. Like Wilson's epiphany about evolution, which arrived during adolescence, so the epiphanies of legions of student generations have been about doubting everything and about revolting against nearly everything, but only up to a point.

Because he takes evolution as his guide, Wilson joins forces with all those who enjoy the excitement of change. The only problem with his particular excitement is that as a relative naïf who exploded upon the world with his (then) incendiary accounts of sociobiology, he was traumatized (I do not think this is too strong a term) by the reaction, especially among some of the more politically hostile social scientists, who interpreted his efforts only politically. They did not want to argue with him, they wanted to shut his thought-world down, and still would if they could. And to this extent, they are not alone on their side, seeing how recent accounts about evolutionary psychology in conservative periodicals such as Commentary and The Weekly Standard have voiced strong reservations about this worldview as well.

The broaching of sociobiology in the 1970s became a public relations disaster, leading to Wilson's ostracism in certain circles. He joined the National Association of Scholars. Everything about the book Consilience (including the title itself which probably denotes "conciliation" in the minds of many who will not look it up in an unabridged dictionary) speaks to his unconscious hope to be redeemed precisely in the minds of those whose cognitive-left suspicions cast doubts about his ultimate "intentions". He is tough on postmodernism, but it is the cliché version of that idea. If it were only a matter of intentions, one could state them, like an oath, and be done with the suspicions. But suspicions run more deeply than that, because what we doubt in others is as much a matter of what they think as with whom they associate. The sociologist, for example, who takes up the subject of sociobiology, is a pariah among the vast majority of his colleagues. The biologist who takes up the same subject is doing her job, although, making behavioral observations that are supposed to substitute for sociology is still mostly beyond the pale.

Yet the cognitive right is on its way to establishing more than a beachhead in the battle with cultural essentialists. It is altogether a different

kind of culture war, not one that engages the religious against the post-religious, and not one that is deadened by the legal doping of millions of people whose therapeutic thought-world controls all but their suicidal tendencies. Rather the culture war in academic precincts especially concerns the fate of generalization about the meaning of culture itself. If we adopt the thought-world of the cognitive left, we give up a great deal in our effort to understand the failure of social policy which has been guided by ideological illusions of equality that no advance in prosperity will ever achieve. On the other hand, if we adopt the thought-world of the cognitive right, we admit certain inevitabilities that make us mostly concerned with the incidence of such failure rather than with what it means to live largely indifferent to some acceptable and expected level of it. The cognitive right attracts the specialists without spirit and the cognitive left attracts the sensualists without heart.

Maximal culture, which is supposed to attend to that which cannot be fixed by human intervention alone—death, for example—contains elements of both the cognitive left and cognitive right. On the left are utopian strategies, on the right adaptive ones. Those who live for the long term behave differently than those who do not, or so we are told by the legions of public health experts who derive such wisdom from what has rapidly become a medicalized view of right and wrong. The cognitive left has appropriated much of the vernacular of a functional, maximal culture, dictating continuous memoranda on the rightful and wrongful ways of living a long, if not what used to be called a good, life.

The gap between gene and behavior is no longer a theoretical imponderable, only a technical challenge to those who subscribe to the ascendancy of ambition of the cognitive right. The

cognitive right's version of revelation, read scientifically as "breakthrough," heralds the triumph of a minimal culture with only a functional, maximal cultural mode of explanation upon which to rely. The gradual and fateful disappearance of what Rieff described as a maximal culture "from which order can be judged and reordered" rather than maintained, manipulated, and managed, is difficult to pinpoint because judgment is what we now seek for our grievances rather than for our own good. The cognitive left once defended the eugenics of political murder in the era of political totalitarianism. In our era of competing, cultural, totalistic thought-worlds, the consensus may very well be that pressure from both sides of the cognitive divide will remain with us as the cost of enlightenment in a world where moral judgment is at best expedient and at worst absent. Doubting culture wars, even as they may recede from media attention, will only lessen the scrutiny of the ways in which moral sensibility continues to change.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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