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The Man Who Discovered ‘Culture Wars’

James Davison Hunter coined the phrase in 1991, a year ahead of Pat Buchanan. Now he reflects on how the struggle has evolved over three decades.

By Jason Willick

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Charlottesville, Va.

An evangelical minister, a Catholic priest and an Orthodox rabbi get arrested in Manhattan. “It sounds like the beginning of a great joke,” says James Davison Hunter. But it was a real event, and it inspired a political theory—“culture wars”—that today resonates far beyond the academy.

Mr. Hunter was a young sociology professor in the late 1980s when he saw the story in a New York newspaper: Police had broken up a large antiabortion protest that included Protestant, Catholic and Jewish clergy. “Given the long legacies of anti-Catholicism, and the long legacies of anti-Semitism in America,” he says, “the fact that you have leaders in these traditions standing arm and arm, in protests, was a pretty remarkable thing in my mind.”

For much of American history, the most salient cultural fault lines were between religious groups. Hostility between Protestants and Catholics prompted bitter battles over school curricula in the mid-19th century, and the fight over Prohibition pitted mostly Protestant “drys” against mostly Catholic “wets.” But by the 1960s cross-denominational conflicts had begun to fade. As America became more culturally diverse, the Protestant consensus gave way to a Christian consensus, and later a “Judeo-Christian” one.

Yet social peace did not arrive. Quite the opposite. A new set of issues emerged out of the sexual revolution and identity politics: not merely abortion, Mr. Hunter says, but everything from “condoms in schools” to “Christopher Columbus, is he a villain or a hero?”

These questions didn't track with traditional left-right economic debates, he continues; nor did they seem to put believers of different denominations in opposition. Instead, the new divide was *within* religious groups, with orthodox believers within Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism on one side and their progressive wings and secularists on the other.

This “new axis” of conflict redefined left and right. It was the basis of Mr. Hunter's 1991 book, “Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America,” which first brought the term to the forefront of popular discourse. Mr. Hunter meant “culture wars” as a descriptive term, not a political cudgel, so he regretted the way Pat Buchanan amplified the idea into a populist call to arms at the 1992 Republican National Convention. “There is a religious war going on in this country,” Mr. Buchanan said. “It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself.”

Mr. Hunter got his title from Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, the late-19th-century effort to absorb Germany's Roman Catholic south into its Protestant north. The two sides, he explains, had “fundamentally different understandings of national identity.” The word *Kulturkampf* translates more literally into “cultural struggle,” but Mr. Hunter feels his tweak was justified. “As I was interviewing people back in the '80s and then into the '90s,” he says, “the activists who were involved in it all said—left and right—this feels like war.”

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As well it might. “The state is the institution that holds the reins of legitimate violence,” Mr. Hunter says, “and this is one of the reasons why our disputes tend to be litigated more than they are actually debated.” When your cultural adversaries are in power, it can feel as if you are under hostile occupation. “The state becomes the patron of a certain vision of the world,” he adds.

On one side is a traditionalist vision that holds truth to be “rooted in an authority outside of the self,” Mr. Hunter says, be it Nature or “the Bible, the Magisteria, the Torah.” Thus

this view's emphasis on maintaining "continuities with the truths of the past." On the other side is a "post-Enlightenment" vision that rejects "transcendent and authoritative traditions." In the progressive view, "freedom is predominant"—especially freedom for groups seen as oppressed by tradition.

Many of the cultural skirmishes Mr. Hunter started writing about in the 1990s remain at the center of politics, including abortion, campus speech codes, multiculturalism, and religion's place in public life. And as he warned they might, the disputes have grown more vituperative—"through Clinton hatred, through Bush hatred, through Obama hatred" and through "every Supreme Court opening."

That's because culture is not a marginal concern, as many educated people profess to believe—even as they often espouse their own dogmatic cultural positions. Rather, culture is "about systems of meaning that help make sense of the world," Mr. Hunter says, "why things are good, true and beautiful, or why things are not. Why things are right and wrong." Culture "provides the moral foundation of a political order."

Mr. Buchanan was on to something, Mr. Hunter suggests, when he tied the culture wars to the end of the Cold War: "Identity is formed not only by our affirmations but by our negations. The Soviet Union—communism generally—was an enemy against which we could define ourselves." When the Berlin Wall fell, "that need for an enemy became internal to the United States." Perhaps the discrediting of the economic left by the collapse of communism made culture a more salient source of domestic conflict.

Another contributing factor was the massive post-World War II expansion of higher education, which Mr. Hunter describes as "a carrier of the secular Enlightenment." This created a larger social base for the progressive outlook. At the same time, mass prosperity reduced the urgency of other social problems. In that sense, Mr. Hunter says, America's culture war is "the kind of conflict that societies can go through when nothing else is at stake."

Yet for many Americans, it felt like everything was. As the battle escalated, the two cultural sides took different approaches. The traditionalists "chose to fight the culture wars politically," Mr. Hunter says. "They are going after the Supreme Court; they are going after the White House." They frequently succeed by "creating coalitions with economic

conservatives, libertarians, and so on.”

But outside government, progressives have a clear cultural advantage in major institutions, from universities to movie studios to publishing houses to advertising agencies. Such institutions matter because “culture is not only a system of meaning” but also an “economy,” Mr. Hunter says. “Where are these cultures actually produced? The culture of conservatives is overwhelmingly produced in the middle-rank, low-prestige institutions.” He points out that Focus on the Family “is located in Colorado Springs; it’s not in New York City; it’s not in L.A.” Conservative colleges, like Wheaton and Hillsdale, are few and widely scattered.

Meanwhile, the “cultural economy of progressivism,” Mr. Hunter says, “is produced out of elite institutions overwhelmingly,” so that progressive values become “normalized in the larger culture industry.” That’s a reversal from the first half of the 20th century, when a churchgoing Protestant establishment dominated the country’s upper crust. “There has been this shift over 50 to 60 years,” he continues, and conservatism’s “cultural production is mainly operating on the periphery.”

That gets to one reason the culture wars have escalated in the past generation: In the modern knowledge economy, class divisions have re-emerged. “For people to remain in the middle class or achieve an upper-middle-class life,” Mr. Hunter says, “they have to go through the credentialing institutions of our society.” In the 1980s and 1990s, the culture wars seemed to be “a debate within the middle class.” That’s still the case, but now the middle class is less fluid, and there is a harder line between workers carrying lunch pails and their managers and other professionals.

“There is now a consolidation of wealth and power and influence, within that top 18% to 20% of the population,” Mr. Hunter says. “They have largely different values, different speech codes, different ways of talking.” Since the turn of the century, he says, there has been a “consolidation of moral visions . . . within class locations.”

As elite institutions increasingly repudiated the values of the masses, the culture wars took on what Mr. Hunter calls a “Nietzschean” quality: The stakes began to seem so high that coalitions would “abandon their values and ideals in order to sustain power.” Upper-class culture professes cosmopolitan openness, but “cultures are not, by their very nature,

tolerant of much plurality,” he says. “So the Harvard Law School prides itself on its diversity, but it’s a diversity in which basically everyone views the world the exact same way.”

In the heat of battle, religious conservatives too have found themselves defending behavior that contradicts their stated moral values. On the relationship between the religious right and the president, he says: If “there is a hope that the state can secure the world, even by someone as imperfect as Trump,” then “religious people, are willing to make all sorts of accommodations”—willing “to justify pretty much anything.”

Sometimes the culture wars have escalated into real violence, as when white supremacists and antifa extremists clashed in Charlottesville last August a mile down the street from Mr. Hunter’s office. Could there be a risk to the political system itself? Mr. Hunter has written before about the parallels between the American culture wars and religious and moral conflicts that have led to state breakdown abroad. In his 1994 book, “Before the Shooting Begins,” he wondered if America’s mostly peaceful culture wars amount to “our postmodern Bosnia.”

One source of optimism is that the U.S. has a remarkable history of accommodating cultural diversity. “It’s not perfect and certainly not linear, and certainly race has been one of those elements of our past and our present that resists that kind of absorption,” he says. “But you look at the Irish, you look at Catholics, Jews, Mormons.” Perhaps that past can be re-created: “My hope is that we can continue to absorb diversity. But it’s certainly being tested right now.”

The aspiration of the Enlightenment, and of liberal democracy, was always “a political order in which you can have a fair amount of diversity,” Mr. Hunter says. Because of the “epic failure of religion to provide a unifying foundation for society”—as demonstrated by the religious wars in 17th-century Europe—Enlightenment thinkers attempted to “retain Jewish and Christian values, understandings of the world, but without any of the creedal foundations.” This is one way of thinking about the project of today’s culture-war progressives: expanding universal equality and dignity, but without a foundational source of authority outside reason and science.

As to the future of the culture wars, Mr. Hunter is ambivalent. He notes that some

progressives have already declared victory and quotes a colleague who said all that remains is “a mopping-up campaign.” Mr. Hunter doesn’t go that far, but he does believe that because “politics is an artifact of culture,” progressives’ disproportionate power in elite institutions “will cash out, politically, in the long term.”

Yet he doubts that reason and science are any better suited than fundamentalist religion to provide a stable basis for morality, even if the West continues to secularize. One challenge of the Enlightenment he says, is that “reason gave us the power to doubt and to question everything, including reason itself.” That “throws us back upon our own subjectivity. . . . You have your truth, I have mine.”

In his forthcoming book, “Science and the Good,” Mr. Hunter argues that the centuries-long “quest to find, in science, a foundation for morality” is “a story of tragic failure.” One passage from the book, co-written with post-doctoral fellow Paul Nedelisky: “A metal detector cannot tell you everything about what’s buried at the beach, but it can tell you about the buried metal things. Similarly, science may not be able to tell us how to live, but it can tell us about physical reality and its laws.”

Mr. Hunter’s culture wars will remain with us as long as Americans keep attempting other methods to find the rest of the treasure under the sand.

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