Culture War: the narcissism of minor differences

Ideological battles have been usurped by petty, bitter clashes over lifestyle.

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On Sunday, a majority of Swiss voters said yes in a referendum on imposing quotas on the arrival of immigrants from EU countries. On the previous weekend, there were mass demonstrations in France, at which protesters chanted slogans in defence of the traditional family and denouncing the school system for planning

to indoctrinate their children with 'gender-equality' sex education. On the same weekend, thousands demonstrated in Madrid against tough new anti-abortion laws drawn up by the Spanish government. In Norway and other parts of Scandinavia, a cultural crusade against the circumcision of boys is gaining momentum. Meanwhile, Russia has become the focus for international protest over its discrimination against gay people.

It seems pretty clear that disputes over values, lifestyles and the question of what is the biggest 'cultural threat' now dominate public life. The political vocabulary that served Western societies pretty well during the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century has become exhausted, and it has been displaced by the idiom of culture. Even disputes that were once discussed through the rhetoric of class, social injustice or ideology now only come alive when they are communicated through the grammar of culture. Leftists attack the 'old boy culture' of the posh, Oxford-based Bullingdon Club or the 'culture of cronyism' of Etonians, while those on the right criticise the 'culture of entitlement' or 'dependency culture' of the less well off. Hostility to the police is frequently expressed through a denunciation of their 'canteen culture'.

Earlier this month, the head of the UK Care Quality Commission accused the National Health Service (NHS) of having a culture that 'does not listen'. The BBC has been condemned for its

'culture of secrecy', which apparently made it possible for child predators such as Jimmy Savile to thrive there. It seems every institution is now undergoing an internal culture war. According to one source, a culture war has broken out among the Tories, led by elderly members and organised Christian groups who fear the erosion of traditional Conservative values. Meanwhile, a Lib Dem whistleblower has drawn attention to the 'culture of sexism' inside her party. When Bridget Harris resigned her post as special adviser to Nick Clegg, she attacked the 'intellectual sexist culture and endemic sleazy culture of Westminster'.

On one level, the obligatory use of the term 'culture of…' to condemn some form of behaviour can be viewed simply as a conceit of modern-day political rhetoric. However, the language of everyday life always tells us something important about the way people attach meaning to their experiences. The promiscuous attachment of the word culture to so many areas of life and politics is not simply a manifestation of sloppy thought; rather, it reflects today's powerful tendency to politicise the minutiae of lifestyle and individual behaviour.

Today, it is through the contestation of norms and values, and a clash over cultural authority, that conflicts of interest are most commonly expressed. And when culture becomes politicised in this way, it tends to drag the personal dimensions of everyday life into the public domain, to the point where what you wear, who

you sleep with, what you eat and consume, how you bring up and feed your child and what you read are often presented and interpreted as political statements. What, in another context, Freud described as the 'narcissism of minor difference' has now acquired a ubiquitous presence in Western societies.

Disputes over contrasting cultural values have a long history, of course. However, during the 1950s a broader unravelling of the prevailing political consensus in Western societies led to a situation where the realm of values, lifestyle and personal life became more politicised, and conflicts that had hitherto been conducted through the language of politics came to be fought in this realm. These disputes, which were motivated by competing claims to moral authority, initially took the form of a polarised clash between traditional and moral values. In the 1960s, these new disputes were further politicised and gained greater definition through the growth of the counterculture and the corresponding backlash against the proponents of a traditionalist and conservative way of life.

In the Sixties, the main battlefield was what we might call the 'pre-political' domain of private life. But throughout the 1970s, disputes regarding family values, sexuality and interpersonal relations expanded and started to touch on bigger questions about consumption and the environment. The politicisation of these values intensified the conflicts that surrounded them. And because

these conflicts touch on the fundamental principles that guide people's everyday conduct and beliefs, they frequently engage people's emotions in a way that other, more traditional political conflicts no longer do. As Francis Fukuyama has noted, 'Conflicts over "values" are potentially much more deadly than conflicts over material possessions or wealth'. It is always possible to come to some sensible compromise over how material resources are divided up or the way political offices are distributed. Values, however, express a person's identity and beliefs, to the point that if those values are not affirmed then an individual may feel that he is being slighted or might even experience an existential crisis. Conflicts involving religion, values or clashing moral claims are very rarely resolved through compromise.

One of the first important studies to draw attention to the significance of what would turn into the contemporary Culture Wars was Gabriel Kolko's 1968 book, *The Politics of War*. Kolko drew attention to what he perceived to be a cultural realignment of public life in the United States. This 'realignment in America's public culture' was about 'allegiances to different formulations and sources of moral authority', he said. He argued that these contrasting sentiments were expressed through the 'institutionalisation and politicisation of two fundamentally different cultural systems'. He also pointed out that the main battleground of this conflict was now the pre-political domain of private life. And he warned that this conflict was not susceptible to

the usual formula of compromise, because 'each side of the cultural divide operates with a different conception of the sacred… and the mere existence of the one represents a certain desecration of the other'.

America was the first Western society where cultural conflicts came to dominate public and political life. But even in the 1970s, it was evident that conflicts over culture would play an increasingly significant role in other societies, too. In Britain, tensions between modernisers and traditionalists always lurked in the background. Samuel Beer's study of these tensions, *Britain Against Itself*, takes as its main theme the decline of civic culture and of deference.

In the literature on the Culture Wars, it is generally argued that the key conflict is one between orthodox and progressive views of morality. Divisions over what are seen as moral issues dominate the Culture War, particularly in the US. But actually, today's cultural conflicts are by no means confined to disputes over the family, sex, abortion or the role of religion. These are key issues for social conservatives and for movements hostile to the influence of traditional values in the private sphere. But the wider cultural critique of capitalism is much more directed at issues that transcend the private or pre-political sphere: it targets consumerism, materialism, the work ethic, technocratic ethos, and

numerous Enlightenment values such as individual autonomy, rationality and progress.

The politicisation of culture is directly connected to the exhaustion of ideology, of the clash of ideological alternatives. By the early 1980s, and certainly by the end of the Cold War in the late Eighties / early Nineties, it was evident that emotional energies that had once been invested in political ideals were increasingly being channelled into moral and cultural issues. As Christopher Lasch pointed out in that period:

'Long-established distinctions between left and right, liberalism and conservatism, revolutionary politics and reformist politics, progressives and reactionaries are breaking down in the face of new questions about technology, consumption, women's rights, environmental decay, and nuclear armaments, questions to which no one has any ready-made answers. New issues give rise to new political configurations. ***So does the growing importance of cultural issues.****' [My emphasis.]*

Since the 1980s, the trends identified by Lasch have intensified, and today issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, sexuality and lifestyle matters dominate public debate.

The politicisation of culture leads to the expression of conflicts in a way that makes them difficult to resolve. Cultural norms and values define communities, their way of life and their members' identities. Such values are internalised by people, becoming

constitutive elements of who we are. Conflicts over the family, sexuality and the conduct of intimate relationships have given public and political life a dramatically personal character. The phrase 'the personal is political' expressed an important shift towards new forms of conflict over the values of the private sphere. Conflict in the private and pre-political spheres resembles political conflicts in wider society in one very important respect. In both spheres, the absence of consensus about fundamental norms and values creates the basis for deep divisions.

One reason many observers find it hard to capture the dynamics of the Culture War is because this conflict rarely assumes an explicit character. Numerous studies insist that talk of the polarisation of culture is exaggerated; some go so far as to deny the very existence of a Culture War. Conservative denunciations of political correctness are met with angry denial that PC exists and claims that backward-looking fundamentalists are just trying to justify their prejudices by attacking new ways of thinking and speaking. The new cultural politics rarely recognises itself for what it is. It cannot openly acknowledge its ambition to monopolise moral authority. Although advocates of lifestyle and identity causes always claim to be tolerant, inclusive and pluralistic, in truth they cannot accept the moral legitimacy of their opponents. That is why in the US, where the Culture War is most developed, the language deployed by both sides is so intemperate and inflammatory.

One of the most memorable expressions of this politicisation of lifestyle occurred in April 2008 when, during the course of the American presidential campaign, Barack Obama gave his 'Bittergate' speech. At a fundraising event in San Francisco, Obama was talking about his difficulty in winning over white working-class voters in the Pennsylvania primary when he said: '[It's] not surprising they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.' This casual and knowing putdown of smalltown folk sent a very clear message about the cultural fault-line that divides America today. Obama is blue (Democrat and liberal), they are red (Republican and traditionalist); he is enlightened, they are bitter.

What underpinned Obama's contemptuous description of the smalltown people of the Rust Belt is a conviction that they inhabit a different moral universe to that of enlightened America. Differences in lifestyle have become so politicised that, now, eating habits, parenting styles, religious belief and so on have all acquired a sharp, divisive moral character. Most of the time, this segmentation of society along lifestyle lines has little disruptive effect; but when it is politicised, as it has been over the past 30 years and more, it becomes a potential source of conflict, a key part of the crisis of values in the twenty-first century.

From a sociological perspective, Obama's Bittergate remarks can be seen as an example of what Max Weber called the 'stylisation of life'. Through the embrace of styles, people set themselves apart, reinforce their status, and draw a moral contrast between their styles of life and other people's styles of life, said Weber. As Pierre Bourdieu noted in his magisterial sociological essay, 'Distinction', 'Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent'. He explained that 'aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between classes'. Struggles over the 'art of living' serve to draw lines between behaviour and attitudes that are considered legitimate and others that are considered morally unworthy.

Today, the politicisation of culture and disputes over the 'art of living' encourage an intolerant, petty and self-serving attitude towards public life. There are no progressive causes that can be advanced through the medium of culture. Those who flatter themselves as enlightened and inclusive are no less complicit than their opponents in creating a climate of intolerance. The Culture Wars are bad news because they encourage narrow-minded and parochial thinking on the part of *all* of the eager participants.

Frank Furedi's latest book, *First World War: Still No End in Sight*, is published by Bloomsbury. (Order this book from Amazon (UK).)

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