**2E. The Future of Democracy in a World of Cultural Polarization**

**A Commentary and Meta-Commentary**

**On "How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy**

# The Pursuit of Philosophy as a Discipline

**Volume III**

## The Prescience of Philosophy as a Discipline:

**Beyond Criticism:**

**How Should Philosophy**

**Progressively Perfect an Ongoing Critique of its Discipline,**

**And,**

**Through Such Constructive Insight,**

**Perceptively Appreciate the Nature of the Human Condition??**

**A Critique of Theory *versus* A Theory of Critique:**

**N.K.Tointon**

**2020 - 2020**

## 2E. The Future of Democracy in a World of Cultural Polarization?

## A Commentary and Meta-Commentary

## On "How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy"*[1]

The text *How the* '*Culture War*' *Could Break Democracy* by Jack Stanton is summarized in the form of a *Commentary*, and, that summary is commented upon in a *Meta-Commentary*. For convenience the text has been divided into thirteen sections from (A) to (M). The *Commentary* noting essential points, the *Meta-Commentary* adding comments. (0)

**Commentary A:** Thirty years ago, sociologist **James Davison Hunter** popularized the concept of culture war. Today, he sees a culture war that's gotten worse—and that spells trouble for the future of the American experiment. (1)

Indeed, a doubling down on this sense of 'culture war'. (2)

This sociologist, James Hunter, is being interviewed by Jack Stanton. (3)

You rarely see… the right rooting their positions within a biblical theology or ecclesiastical tradition. [Nowadays,] it is a position that is mainly rooted in fear of extinction. (4)

"Democracy, in my view, is an agreement that we will not kill each other over our differences, but instead we'll talk through those differences. And part of what's troubling is that I'm beginning to see signs of the justification for violence," says Hunter, noting the insurrection on January 6, when a mob of extremist supporters of Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol… (5)

"On political matters, one can compromise; on matters of ultimate moral truth, one cannot." (6)

Where does that leave us? What does it portend for the decades to come? Is there a way to bridge these cultural impasses? And, amid all of this, is there a source for optimism? (7)

**Meta-Commentary A':** The stage for a dialogue with this interviewed author is set. There is a culture war between Right and Left and in a contemporary form that is no longer directly based on Christian customs and ideals? (8)

**B:** With respect to recent political polarization politics is both the problem and the solution. Moreover, culture underwrites our politics." (9)

Two ways of seeing 'culture war'. First, clashes over certain issues like abortion, sexuality, church-state issues, etc. Second, as a bigger picture, it's about the cultures that underwrite our politics. Reflections on deeper cultural concerns. This expression usually referring to both senses. (10)

**B':** In my estimation we have a number of drivers that are promoting this process of polarization… neo-liberal policy settings, globalization, the specialization of work (and a loss

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* For latest version of this essay: www.homestead.com/noelshomepage/noelshomepage5.html

1 Article by Jack Stanton, Deputy Editor for *POLITICO Playbook* (article appended).

of blue collar workers, shifts towards the service sector), inadequate wages (especially for lower socio-economic workers form the lower middle-class down), political donations, politicians pandering to populist impulses, the adverse influences of an unsupervised and poorly controlled, 'out of control' social media, demographic changes and shifts in the dynamics of cultural power relations, and so on. (11)

**C:** Modern higher education has always been a carrier of the Enlightenment, and, in that sense, a carrier of secularization. (12)

The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture got carried by universities [and] other important cultural institutions, and these cultural institutions are dominated by supermajorities of progressives. (13)

Conservatives see this as an existential threat… As a fear of (cultural) extinction… (14)

**C':** Increasing education almost always induces cultural revolutions when and where cultural anomalies are first experienced with a deeper, more profound sense of cognitive dissonance only to be overcome through a return to some degree of normality? Albeit with reformational shifts in the ensuing form of that culture. But, could this process of rectification happen in the current cultural context (where democracies are seemingly coming under a variety of considerable stresses without adequately responding?)? (15)

Then, again, if cultural 'suspensions' can be induced, new directions could be taken up… it surely cannot mean that positive courses of change are impossible to establish? (16)

**D:** I would argue that what abortion was to [culture wars in] the '70s, '80s and '90s and maybe even beyond, when it was really the critical issue, I think that's now being replaced by race. The earlier culture wars were a cultural conflict that took place primarily within the white middle class. It's not that minorities didn't have positions [on those issues] or weren't divided themselves, but race was never a very prominent part of *that* conflict… (17)

2008 was a really important year, insofar as the Great Recession accentuated an important distinction within the white middle class. It drove a wedge between the middle and lower-middle or working class and the highly trained, professionally educated managers, technocrats and intellectuals—basically, between the top 20 percent and the bottom 80 percent. And that meant [there] were now *class* differences that were overlaid upon some of these *cultural* differences. (18)

So now, instead of just culture wars, there's now a kind of class-culture conflict. (19)

…the ways in which progressives speak about the downtrodden: Most of the time, it is in terms of race and ethnicity, immigration and the like; it is not about the poor, per se. I think that's a pretty significant shift in the left's self-understanding. (20)

**D':** No doubt this class-culture conflict is exacerbated by neo-liberal, political-economic policies instated over recent decades. It is interesting that when recently interviewed, some employers in the US seeking to reopen their businesses in hospitality have had to increase the hourly rates to better attract workers. Some of the reasons put forward by economists for this apparently needed shift in minimum rates of pay, etc., is a complex mix of unemployment benefits (generally pitched at the lower end of what finance is actually required), need for

child care, fear of catching Covid whilst waiting to be vaccinated, etc. As in studies done in instances of a universal basic income (UBI) workers no longer have to just work for wages that do not reflect fully the incurred costs of living. Quite paradoxical given that economist see the general economy in the US rebounding, but, also calculate that after the start of 2021 8 million jobs as yet have not returned from levels recorded in February 2020. (21)

**E:** Straightforward, materialist social science would say that people are voting their economic interests all the time. But they don't. The seeming contradiction of people voting against their economic interests only highlights that point: That, in many respects, our self-understanding as individuals, as communities and as a nation trumps all of those things. (22)

**E':** Quite a conundrum. A phenomenon also represented in Australia? At the last Australian Federal Elections the Labor Party came out with a suite of policies that would have better assisted workers at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum but people, on balance, more voted for the populist policies of the Coalition (framed to some degree to capture non-Coalition votes from the relatively Far Right who were taking a more populist stance?). (23)

**F:** We are constituted as human beings by the stories we tell about ourselves. The very nature of meaning and purpose in life are constituted by our individual and collective self-understandings. How that is a "distraction" is beyond me? (24)

You know, people will fight to the death for an idea, for an ideal. I was criticized in the early '90s for using the word "war" [in the term "culture war"]. But I was trained in phenomenology, in which you are taught to pay attention to the words that people themselves use. And in interviews I did [with those on the front lines of "culture war" fights], people would say, "you know, it feels like a *war*"—even on the left. (25)

**F':** A culture 'war' seems apt. People are very heated on such political realities as they see them… hopefully, it will not come to a real war although there are signs that could happen (civil wars, insurrections, violence on the streets towards minorities, the frequency of protests, authoritarian governments being able to overcome relatively massive street protests, etc?). (26)

**G:** Political compromise is ever possible but cultural compromise is impossible. Culture, by its very nature, is hegemonic. It seeks to colonize; it seeks to envelop in its totality. The root of the word "culture" is Latin: "cultus." It's about what is sacred to us. (27)

**G':** But, this lack of compromise spills over into politics. Such an understanding might throw light on the Palestinian desire for statehood being thwarted by Jewish politicians to date? On the other hand, if an equality of recognition were present could cultural differences be culturally minimized? That various degrees of compromise are always possible to engineer. Different cultures have reached forms of understood compromise in the past, but, suspect that when the power dynamics of different cultures in interaction should radically change in confined regions then such forms of *détente* are easily lost? Necessitating hard work to regain such civil understandings, (28)

**H:** Can you have a stable democracy without compromise? (29)

No, I don't think you can. Part of our problem is that we have politicized everything. And yet politics becomes a proxy for cultural positions that simply won't brook any kind of dissent or argument. (30)

In the original book, I had a short chapter about the technologies of communication and discourse, and the ways they've accentuated polarization. I argued that because of these technologies, our public culture is more polarized than we, as a people, are. And the technology I was talking about is just going to sound really funny nowadays: It was direct mail. This was [1991], before social media. (31)

**H':** Social media can certainly drive polarization. However, to my mind donations and not-for-profit organizations, that are the beneficiaries of such monies, were already doing that before the Internet. But, optimistically speaking, that the very trends that trend one way can be the very trends made to trend the other way. We just need to alter the mix of presuppositional conditions that are driving trends in whichever directions. (32)

**I:** Is the democratization of free speech making democratic governance difficult? To what extent do politicians that divide the populace gaining power from such political over-attention? (33)

**I':** Trump would seem to be the perfect role model here. But, equally representative of a phenomenon world-wide (along with the vilification of the Press, etc.). (34)

**J:** My view is that the reason why we're continuing to see this press toward racial reckoning is because it's never been addressed *culturally*. (35)

I think that this work takes a long time and it's hard. I think you talk through the conflicts. Don't ignore them; don't pretend that they don't exist. And whatever you do, don't just simply impose your view on anyone else. You *have to* talk them through. It's the long, hard work of education. (36)

The whole point of civil society, at a sociological level, is to provide mediating institutions to stand between the individual and the state, or the individual and the economy. They're at their best when they are doing just that: They are mediating, they are educating. I know that argument is part of the "old" liberal consensus view, the "old" rules of public discourse. But the alternatives are violence. And I think we are getting to that point. (37)

The book that I followed "Culture Wars" with was called "Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War." And the argument I made was that culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don't *necessarily* lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence. (38)

**J':** Obviously, the forces that are polarizing a society need to be stopped and reversed. In fact, those pre-conditions would fall under a variety of categories such as, e.g., economic, cultural, political, educational spheres of influence, and so on. We could rightly argue that some form of political supension (and de-suspension) needs to be instituted? (39)

**K:** Can we be optimistic? (40)

Look: Not to hope—to give in to despair—is never an option, in my opinion. That's an ethical position I think one has to take. But I also don't think that you tell a patient that they have a bad cold when, in fact, they have a life-threatening disease. (41)

**K':** History has plenty of reasons for both pessimism and optimism. As cultural imperatives the right people will have to come on board… just as more people are standing up for an assortment of issues, from environmental awareness to police reform, from economic reforms that steer us back from neo-liberal policies to those that are socially beneficial and truly evidence-based? (42)

**L:** What is going to underwrite liberal democracy in the 21st century? To me, it's not obvious. That's the big puzzle I'm working through right now. (43)

**L':** By what people fall by the same route they can rise. All problems come with some semblance of a solution embedded in their very formulation. (44)

**M:** That we are in need of a serious reconstitution of national myths or something to replace the same? (45)

And the myths that do seem to exist are mainly technocratic and dystopian. So … I think we're in trouble. (46)

Part of what has made it especially acute in the United States is the proliferation of non-profit special-interest groups. You don't find that in Europe; you don't find it in England or Germany. Those are more statist regimes, and have much greater control over the non-profit space. [Whereas, in the U.S.] you have the proliferation of special-interest groups that take sides. And a lot of our charitable money—which is a massive amount compared to other countries—gets channeled through these charitable organizations that exist with a take-no-prisoners policy; that define the enemy, that define a devil, that define transgressions in certain ways. (47)

They're all in battle. And it's, again, part of what you described earlier: It's just more expansive. The range of the culture war seems to be all-encompassing. (48)

**M':** Well, it seems obvious, that we have to fall back on forms of conflict resolution and politically adopt those measures that reverse these adverse trends such as curtailing socially corrosive donations… (49)

**Some Final Reflections to Conclude this Meta-Commentary**

Let me suggest some policy changes that might address and redress the possible root-causes of this cultural polarization. (50)

E.g., my reiteration of the refrain that 'donations need to be downsized!' – to just small donations from voters and voters only, etc. (51)

Then, people need to be made to feel valued and not marginalized – so, e.g., neo-liberal policies have to be stopped, reframed and reversed, increment by increment. Middle-class welfare needs to be eliminated. Listening to the concerns of voters and not prioritizing the commercial demands of businesses! Artist are needed more than ever – so we need to better patronize them. Moreover, education should be expanded and reframed as a form of

‘social education’ rather than just being exercised merely as a pursuit of a vocational objective (poorly expedited by the Tertiary sector as it stands). Then, the costs of education for the individual student have to be drastically cut and seen as a social benefit that deserves to be more paid for by the state (along with serious pre-school education as well; a policy position that has demonstrable, evidence-based short-term and long-term benefits). Social benefits also need to be seriously rethought. The entire gamut from employment to unemployment needs to be thought through differently! Superannuation should be designed purely for the welfare of the retired, for all citizens whatever socio-economic brackets they might belong within (and, by such means, removing the sole need for government pensions). The superannuation of women, e.g., should also be differentially treated until proper wage parity between genders is finally arrived at, and, somehow, also takes into account forms of compensation for those years spent in the raising of children, etc. The other twin pillar of a democracy, besides education, is the provision of suitable, affordable healthcare… (52)

Our democracies have a lot to turn around and proceed with. Noted here are just a small selection of ideas that need to be attended to both during and after this current pandemic. Perhaps in an amelioration of the economic hardship being perceived, rightly or wrongly, on the part of all socio-economic classes, cultures and minorities, etc., the intensity of such cultural polarization might find itself somewhat defused and, therein and thereafter, a state of affairs, through processes of reversal, that might more easily be both rectified and renormalized? (53)

Noël Tointon, Wentworth Falls, 3.6.21.

# How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy

Thirty years ago, sociologist **James Davison Hunter** popularized the concept of culture war. Today, he sees a culture war that's gotten worse—and that spells trouble for the future of the American experiment.

By Zack Stanton (5/20/2021/20.5.21): Deputy editor of *POLITICO Playbook*

(A)[2] In 1991, with America gripped by a struggle between an increasingly liberal secular society that pushed for change and a conservative opposition that rooted its worldview in divine scripture, James Davison Hunter wrote a book and titled it with a phrase for what he saw playing out in America's fights over abortion, gay rights, religion in public schools and the like: "Culture Wars."

Hunter, a 30-something sociologist at the University of Virginia, didn't invent the term, but his book vaulted it into the public conversation, and within a few years it was being used as shorthand for cultural flashpoints with political ramifications. He hoped that by calling attention to the dynamic, he'd help America "come to terms with the unfolding conflict" and, perhaps, defuse some of the tensions he saw bubbling.

Instead, 30 years later, Hunter sees America as having doubled down on the "war" part—with the culture wars expanding from issues of religion and family culture to take over politics almost totally, creating a dangerous sense of winner-take-all conflict over the future of the country.

"Democracy, in my view, is an agreement that we will not kill each other over our differences, but instead we'll talk through those differences. And part of what's troubling is that I'm beginning to see signs of the justification for violence," says Hunter, noting the insurrection on January 6, when a mob of extremist supporters of Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overthrow the results of the 2020 election. "Culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don't *necessarily* lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence."

What changed? In the latter half of the 20th century, the culture war was, on some level, a "cultural conflict that took place primarily within the white middle class," says Hunter, who now leads the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. But, today, as that conflict has grown, "instead of just culture wars, there's now a kind of class-culture conflict" that has moved beyond the simple boundaries of religiosity.

"The earlier culture war really was about secularization, and positions were tied to theologies and justified on the basis of theologies," says Hunter. "That's no longer the case. You rarely see people on the right rooting their positions within a biblical

[2] I have added the letters (A) to (M) to make this text more amenable to the commentary and sub-commentary that has preceded it.

theology or ecclesiastical tradition. [Nowadays,] it is a position that is mainly rooted in fear of extinction."

In 1991, politics still seemed like a vehicle through which we might resolve divisive cultural issues; now, politics is primarily fueled by division on those issues, with leaders gaining power by inflaming resentments on mask-wearing, or transgender students competing in athletics, or invocations of "cancel culture," or whether it's OK to teach that many of the Founding Fathers had racist beliefs. And this reality—that the culture war has colonized American politics—is troubling precisely because of an observation Hunter made in 1991 about the difference he saw between political issues and culture war fights: "On political matters, one can compromise; on matters of ultimate moral truth, one cannot."

Where does that leave us? What does it portend for the decades to come? Is there a way to bridge these cultural impasses? And, amid all of this, is there a source for optimism?

To sort through it all, POLITICO Magazine spoke with Hunter on the phone late last week. A condensed transcript of that conversation is below, edited for length and clarity.

(B) Q: Let's start with a basic question: Whether we're talking about 2021 or back in 1991, when your book, "Culture Wars," came out, what is it that we mean by the term "culture war"?

JAMES DAVISON HUNTER: Well, in a world that has politicized everything, there's a sense that politics is both the root cause of the problems we face and, ultimately, the solution. But the larger argument that I make is that politics is an artifact of culture. It's a reflection: Culture underwrites our politics.

When it comes to "culture war," there are two ways of thinking about it.

**"Politics is an artifact of culture. It's a reflection: culture underwrites our politics."**

One — probably the most prevalent way—is to think of it as a political battle over certain kinds of cultural issues, like abortion, sexuality, family values, church-state issues, and so on. And therefore, the "culture war" is really about the mobilization of political resources —of people and votes and parties—around certain positions on cultural issues. In that sense, a "culture war" is really about politics.

But the *bigger* story is about the cultures that underwrite our politics, and the ways in which our politics become reflections of deeper cultural dispositions—not just attitudes and values—that go beyond our ability to reason about them.

When we talk about "culture war," it's really about both things.

In simpler terms, I would make the distinction between the weather and the climate. Almost all journalists and most academics focus on what's happening in the weather: "Today, it's cold. Tomorrow, it's going to be warm. The next day, it's going to rain." I

find the *climatological* changes that are taking place to be much more interesting. And it's those that are really animating our politics and polarization, animating dynamics within democracy right now.

(C) The changes you looked at in "Culture Wars" had largely happened over the 30 years prior—basically since the early 1960s, with the civil rights movement, sexual revolution, the gay rights movement, women's lib and the backlashes that followed. It's now 30 years since that book came out. How has the culture war changed in that time?

An important demographic and institutional structural shift took place [in recent decades]. Modern higher education has always been a carrier of the Enlightenment, and, in that sense, a carrier of secularization. What happened in the post-World War II period was a massive expansion of higher education and the knowledge-based economy. And with that came a larger cultural shift: What used to be the province of intellectuals now became the province of anyone who had access to higher education, and higher education became one of the gates through which the move to middle class or upper middle class life was made.

With that came profound cultural change. The '60s revolution and the political, cultural and sexual protests at the time essentially became institutionalized, and it challenged fundamental notions of what was right, decent, good, fair and so on. And in a way, what you had in the late 1970s into the '80s and '90s was a reaction *against* the challenge represented by that structural change. Conservatives—especially conservative Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant—found themselves on the defensive against progressive notions of family structure, "family values," sexuality; abortion was a—or maybe *the*—critical issue.

Martin E. Marty, the church historian from Chicago, once said that after the Volstead Act and the Scopes trial, evangelical Protestants became a *cognitive* minority—a minority within intellectual realms—but remained a *social and behavioral* majority—they basically owned middle America. What we have seen since is a continuation of those structural changes. The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture got carried by universities [and] other important cultural institutions, and these cultural institutions are dominated by supermajorities of progressives.

**"Conservatives see this as an existential threat. That's an important phrase: They see it as an existential threat to their way of life, to the things that they hold sacred."**

Conservatives see this as an existential threat. That's an important phrase: They see it as an *existential threat* to their way of life, to the things that they hold sacred. So while the earlier culture war really was about secularization, and positions were tied to theologies and justified on the basis of theologies, that's no longer the case. You rarely see people on the right rooting their positions within a biblical theology or ecclesiastical tradition. [Nowadays,] it is a position that is mainly rooted in fear of extinction.

(D) Are the dividing lines of the "culture war" different now than they were, say, 30 years ago?

I would argue that what abortion was to [culture wars in] the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s and maybe even beyond, when it was really the critical issue, I think that’s now being replaced by race. The earlier culture wars were a cultural conflict that took place primarily within the white middle class. It’s not that minorities didn’t have positions [on those issues] or weren’t divided themselves, but race was never a very prominent part of *that* conflict. And I think it has reemerged in part because just as the earlier manifestations of the culture war were ultimately a struggle to define the meaning of America, this is also. Latent within these struggles is a conflict over the meaning of America.

**“I would argue that what abortion was to [culture wars in] the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s and maybe even beyond, when it was really the critical issue, I think that’s now being replaced by race.”**

2008 was a really important year, insofar as the Great Recession accentuated an important distinction within the white middle class. It drove a wedge between the middle and lower-middle or working class and the highly trained, professionally educated managers, technocrats and intellectuals—basically, between the top 20 percent and the bottom 80 percent. And that meant [there] were now *class* differences that were overlaid upon some of these *cultural* differences. And in surveys that we've done here at the Institute [for Advanced Cultural Studies at University of Virginia], we’ve tracked that. In 2016, the single most important factor in determining a Trump vote was not having a college degree.

So now, instead of just culture wars, there's now a kind of class-culture conflict. With a sense of being on the losing side of our global economy and its dynamics, I think that the resentments have just deepened. That became obvious, more and more, over the four years of Trump, and part of Trump’s own genius was understanding the resentments of coming out on the losing side of global capitalism.

And I think this is reflected, too, in the ways in which progressives speak about the downtrodden: Most of the time, it is in terms of race and ethnicity, immigration and the like; it is not about the poor, per se. I think that’s a pretty significant shift in the left’s self-understanding.

(E) What do you think is behind that shift?

Well, if you became an advocate for the working class, you’d be an advocate for a lot of Trump voters. Again, I think there's a class-culture divide: a class element that overlays the cultural divide. And they [white non-college-educated voters] voted *en masse* for Trump. And I think that’s an element of it. They’re also the carriers of what [some on the left] perceive to be racist and misogynist, sexist understandings and ways of life. That’s my guess.

Straightforward, materialist social science would say that people are voting their economic interests all the time. But they don’t. The seeming contradiction of people voting against their economic interests only highlights that point: That, in many respects, our self-understanding as individuals, as communities and as a nation trumps all of those things.

(F) Along those lines, there can be a tendency, especially on the political left, to talk about "culture war" issues as being "distractions" that are raised in order to divide people who might otherwise find common cause around, say, shared economic interests. What do you make of that view?

We are constituted as human beings by the stories we tell about ourselves. The very nature of meaning and purpose in life are constituted by our individual and collective self-understandings. How that is a "distraction" is beyond me.

You know, people will fight to the death for an idea, for an ideal. I was criticized in the early '90s for using the word "war" [in the term "culture war"]. But I was trained in phenomenology, in which you are taught to pay attention to the words that people themselves use. And in interviews I did [with those on the front lines of "culture war" fights], people would say, "you know, it feels like a *war*"—even on the left.

**"We are constituted as human beings by the stories we tell about ourselves. … How that is a 'distraction' is beyond me."**

I talk about this sense of a struggle for one's very existence, for a way of life; this is *exactly* the language that is also used on the left, but in a much more therapeutic way. When you hear people say that, for instance, conservatives' very existence on this college campus is "a *threat* to my existence" as a trans person or gay person, the stakes — for them — seem ultimate.

The question is: What is it that animates our passions? I don't know how one can imagine individual and collective identity—and the things that make life meaningful and purposeful—as somehow peripheral or as "distractions."

(G) There's a passage you wrote 30 years ago that seems relevant to this point: "We subtly slip into thinking of the controversies debated as political rather than cultural in nature. On political matters, one can compromise; on matters of ultimate moral truth, one cannot. This is why the full range of issues today seems interminable."

I kind of like that sentence. *[Laughs]* I would put it this way: Culture, by its very nature, is hegemonic. It seeks to colonize; it seeks to envelop in its totality. The root of the word "culture" is Latin: "cultus." It's about what is sacred to us. And what is sacred to us tends to be universalizing. The very nature of the sacred is that it is special; it can't be broached.

Culture, in one respect, is about that which is pure and that which is polluted; it is about the boundaries that are often transgressed, and what we do about that. And part of the culture war—one way to see the culture war—is that each has an idea of what is transgressive, of what is a violation of the sacred, and the fears and resentments that go along with that.

Every culture has its view of sin. It's an old-fashioned word, but it [refers to that which] is, ultimately, profane and cannot be permitted, must not be allowed. Understanding those things that underwrite politics helps us understand why this persists the way it does, why it inflames the passions that we see.

(H) It feels like the universe of things that might be considered part of the "culture war" has grown considerably over the past 30 years, such that it seems to now envelop most of politics. In that situation, how does democracy work? Because when the stakes are existential, it would seem like compromise is impossible. Can you have a stable democracy without compromise?

No, I don't think you can. Part of our problem is that we have politicized everything. And yet politics becomes a proxy for cultural positions that simply won't brook any kind of dissent or argument.

You hear this all the time. The very idea of treating your opponents with civility is a *betrayal*. How can you be civil to people who threaten your very existence? It highlights the point that culture is hegemonic: You can compromise with politics and policy, but if politics and policy are a proxy for culture, there's just no way.

**"I think that there are ways in which serious and substantive democratic discourse is made difficult, if not impossible, by the democratization and proliferation of free speech."**

In the original book, I had a short chapter about the technologies of communication and discourse, and the ways they've accentuated polarization. I argued that because of these technologies, our public culture is more polarized than we, as a people, are. And the technology I was talking about is just going to sound really funny nowadays: It was direct mail. This was [1991], before social media.

So, take the role of some of the extraordinary advances in social media and the ways in which these multiply the anonymity, the extremism of rhetoric, the absence of any kind of accountability in our public speech. They take what is already a shallow discourse—you know, the trading of slogans, and the like—and make it even more difficult to find any kind of depth.

How do you compromise when that becomes the dominant form of discourse? I think that there are ways in which serious and substantive democratic discourse is made difficult, if not impossible, by the democratization and proliferation of free speech. That seems like a strange thing to say, but …

(I) On that front, I think one of the difficulties is that there is sometimes a very clear calculation made on the part of people involved in politics that conflict leads to attention, and media attention leads to political power. That feels like a cycle difficult to break out of.

Democracy, in my view, is an agreement that we will not kill each other over our differences, but instead we'll talk through those differences. And part of what's troubling is that I'm beginning to see signs of the justification for violence on both sides. Obviously, on January 6, we not only saw an act of violence—I mean, talk about a transgression—but one that the people who were involved were capable of justifying. That's an extraordinary thing.

**“Democracy, in my view, is an agreement that we will not kill each other over our differences, but instead we’ll talk through those differences. And part of what's troubling is that I’m beginning to see signs of the justification for violence on both sides.”**

If I could draw a parallel, it’s not unlike the Civil War. There was a culture war for 30 years prior to the Civil War. The Civil War was—without question—about slavery and the status of Black men and women, and, yes, the good guys won [the Civil War]—at the cost of 4 out of 10 Southern males dying and 1 out of 10 Northern males dying. But think about what happened: *Dred Scott* was an attempt to impose a consensus by law; it took the Civil War *and* the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to overturn *Dred Scott*. And yet that was also an imposition of solidarity by law and by force. The failures of Reconstruction and the emergence of Jim Crow and “Black Codes” and all of that was proof that politics couldn’t solve culture; it couldn't solve the cultural tensions, and so what you end up with is a struggle for civil rights.

My view is that the reason why we’re continuing to see this press toward racial reckoning is because it's never been addressed *culturally*.

In other words, racial justice failed by succeeding. The international slave trade ended in 1808. And it created this sense of complacency: “Oh, we’ve dealt with that.” Yet the slave trade and number of slaves grew astronomically over the next 50 years. Then the Civil War was fought and won: “Oh, we’ve dealt with that. Now we can move on.” It created complacency. I think that’s what happened after the civil rights movement and [the Rev. Martin Luther] King’s martyrdom: It was a tremendous success at one level, but created complacency, *especially* among whites—“We’ve dealt with that. We don’t need to deal with this anymore”—when, in fact, ongoing discrimination is still happening. It represents, again, the attempt to generate a kind of cultural consensus through political means. And that doesn’t seem to work.

(J) What would it look like to actually reckon with that issue, culturally?

Well, I’m going to sound really old-fashioned here, but I think that this work takes a long time and it’s hard. I think you talk through the conflicts. Don’t ignore them; don’t pretend that they don’t exist. And whatever you do, don’t just simply impose your view on anyone else. You *have to* talk them through. It’s the long, hard work of education.

The whole point of civil society, at a sociological level, is to provide mediating institutions to stand between the individual and the state, or the individual and the economy. They're at their best when they are doing just that: They are mediating, they are educating. I know that argument is part of the “old” liberal consensus view, the “old” rules of public discourse. But the alternatives are violence. And I think we are getting to that point.

**“Culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don’t necessarily lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence.”**

The book that I followed “Culture Wars” with was called “Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War.” And the argument I made was that culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don’t *necessarily* lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence. And I think that's where we are. The climatological indications are pretty worrisome.

(K) Given that, do you feel optimistic about the outlook for things in the United States in this era of constant “culture war,” with so much of it being fed by the Internet?

Look: Not to hope—to give in to despair—is never an option, in my opinion. That’s an ethical position I think one has to take. But I also don’t think that you tell a patient that they have a bad cold when, in fact, they have a life-threatening disease.

In this tangle between very powerful institutions and very powerful cultural logics, there are serious problems that are deeply rooted. The great democratic revolutions of Western Europe and North America were rooted in the intellectual and cultural revolution of Enlightenment; the Enlightenment underwrote those political transformations. If America’s hybrid Enlightenment underwrote the birth of liberal democracy in the United States, what underwrites it now?

**“What is going to underwrite liberal democracy in the 21st century? To me, it’s not obvious.”**

What is going to underwrite liberal democracy in the 21st century? To me, it’s not obvious. That’s the big puzzle I’m working through right now. But it bears on this issue of culture wars, because if there's nothing that we share in common—if there is no hybrid enlightenment that we share—then what are the sources we can draw upon to come together and find any kind of solidarity?

(L) It’s as though there are no unifying national myths. And those that once occupied that place in American life are now subject to debate and the culture war.

That’s exactly right. And the myths that do seem to exist are mainly technocratic and dystopian. So … I think we’re in trouble. But I’m not sure you should end with that.

(M) Well, I’ll end with this, then: Is there something unique about America that makes it especially prone to culture war, or is this kind of par for the course?

Part of what has made it especially acute in the United States is the proliferation of nonprofit special-interest groups. You don't find that in Europe; you don't find it in England or Germany. Those are more statist regimes, and have much greater control over the nonprofit space. [Whereas, in the U.S.] you have the proliferation of special-interest groups that take sides. And a lot of our charitable money—which is a massive amount compared to other countries—gets channeled through these charitable organizations that exist with a take-no-prisoners policy; that define the enemy, that define a devil, that define transgressions in certain ways.

They're all in battle. And it's, again, part of what you described earlier: It's just more expansive. The range of the culture war seems to be all-encompassing.

I have this old-fashioned view that what we're supposed to do is to *understand* before we take action, and that wisdom depends upon understanding. That basically makes me a conservative today—but it also makes me a progressive by conservative standards.

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