



Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America

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A riveting account of how Christian fundamentalists, Orthodox Jews, and conservative Catholics have joined forces in a battle against their progressive counterparts for control of American secular culture.

Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America Details

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From Reader Review Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America for online ebook

Alex Stroshine says

Although written over a quarter of a century ago, this book is a classic, an indispensable guide written by a fair and thoughtful sociologist that demonstrates why the United States (and much of the West) is polarized between two competing moral visions. Hunter traces the origins of the culture wars in America, noting that the push to the opposite ends of the moral spectrum began escalating after the Second World War, and focuses largely on the key battlegrounds where conservatives and liberals fight: the family, education, media and the arts, law, and electoral politics. These battlegrounds are significant because they wield symbolic value in the eyes of the general public. Hunter examines how conservatives and liberals define these social institutions; for instance, conservatives deem art to be that which speaks to transcendent notions of beauty, truth, and goodness, whereas liberals demur, asserting that art is only that which is designated as such (usually by experts), that is novel, and that it is free to transgress the boundaries of moral niceties (as exhibited by the photographs of the late Robert Mapplethorpe).

This book was written at the beginning of the 1990s and much has changed (this book was released BEFORE Fox News launched, let alone other right-wing media such as The Federalist and InfoWars), but it is still well worth reading. Hunter enthuses about the role of direct mail in stirring the soldiers of the culture war, but its format would now be in email (and indeed, while Hunter notes how vital the knowledge industry is in our culture, he wrote this book before the advent of the Internet age which has dramatically transformed society by providing platforms for marginalized groups to find each other - think of how Tumblr has become a haven for the LGBTQ community). Debates about the Equal Rights Amendment and the legitimacy of same-sex relations have given way to intersectionality and transgenderism but debates and political machinations are still waged over abortion; what has not changed is the competition to frame the USA according to the conservative and liberal moral visions. In many respects this work reminded me of Jonathan Haidt's excellent book "The Righteous Mind."

John says

The term "culture war" is much used, even tired today, but Hunter actually coined the term himself. And while the book was published 25 years ago (1991), the book deserves an audience, particularly in light of the most recent election. In fact, at points Hunter is eerily prescient (I'll share more on that below).

Hunter defines a cultural conflict as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding" (42). According to Hunter, the culture war in America revolves around different worldviews, "our most fundamental and cherished assumptions about how to order our lives - our own lives and our lives together in this society" (42). The contemporary culture war is "a struggle over national identity - over the meaning of America, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium" (50).

While the culture war is being battled by the elite and in ivory towers, the war also flows into the everyday lives of Americans.

Hunter demonstrates that the inflammatory rhetoric used by those on the extreme ends of the culture war

debates serves to harden the other side in their respective positions and is a recipe for disaster. Writing in 1991, Hunter could not have imagined, of course, the rise of echo chambers not only in talk radio and on television, but also on the internet.

Among his many eerily predictive moments, Hunter says, "By its very nature, the libertarian impulse in progressive moral philosophy is to 'invent rights, ever more rights.'" He continues "A strong tendency on the progressivist side of the cultural divide, then, is to defend moral pluralism as a social good and to encourage a corresponding expansion of toleration. The tendency on the other side is to reject moral pluralism as a social evil and to do whatever possible to inhibit its possible expansion. Such fundamental disagreements poignantly signify a loss of the unum, the 'center,' the moral consensus in American public philosophy" (311).

Titus Hjelm says

I think it is a solid thesis--who can *really* claim that a polarisation of public discourse doesn't exist in the US, and increasingly in Europe? I think the critiques have been off topic at times. But, obviously the emergence of social media in the last 20 years has changed the field massively which makes the reading interesting but definitely outdated in many respects. The book (because it is written for a popular audience, after all) is also very wordy. The basic idea could have been presented in much less space.

Maureen says

i read this years ago, and thought it was about time for a refresher...

Lorraine says

I skimmed through this for my thesis, so this review is only relevant for those who are interested in the relevance of this to the notion of aesthetics within the literary academy.

I think that it was useful in some ways: an overarching framework that explains the rift between conservatives and progressives. In terms of art, it helpfully points out the theology of art that has been slowly built up since Romanticism but does not elucidate the fractures within this theology, instead focusing on the ideological differences between the religious right and its conception of art and the liberal left and its notion of art.

Joseph R. Howard says

If you want to know what the hell happened in America over the last 20 years, you need to read this! Everything that is "mainstream" today that was thought socially abnormal or shameful to conservatives in the past has all been part of a plan to desensitize the American public since the late-1980s and early-1990s. I highly suggest this book!

Eric says

If you want to know why some, perhaps most, of the current political issues and events are so rancorous and uncompromising, this is the book to read. Bypassing the superficial, media sound bite comments and grandstanding demagoguery that is prevalent in today's public discourse, Hunter looks at the fundamental differences in worldviews, motives, and methods between what he calls the Orthodox and the Progressives as each tries to define--and control--society. Hunter fleshes out his observations in the current battlegrounds of family/marriage, education, law, politics/policy, and art. Giving equal attention to both sides of the argument, this book is thoughtful and insightful rather than a one-sided polemic. An excellent and informative read.

Craig Stewart says

cultural conflicts need to be understood for the peace of USA and the world and this book is a good start toward helping us learn about that

Matthew says

So, this review is not actually for this book, but is for Hunter's other book: "To Change the World", but unfortunately, I cannot find that book on Goodreads, so I am leaving my review for it here.

Apparently this book is somewhat controversial in that it tends to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" in its critique of politicizing topics in which evangelical Christians would like to influence the culture at large. I do agree with this critique, but more importantly, I find the book very thought provoking in new and unique ways and ultimately this is one of the main reasons I read books, so I would recommend this book despite its shortcomings.

Zhelana says

At one point, the author makes an equivalency between gays handing out condoms at a Catholic church with the violence perpetrated against gays by conservatives. That's right, in the author's world, handing out condoms is just like murdering someone for being gay.

Jeremy Meeks says

Just as relevant today as it was over 20 years ago. Hopefully explains much of the tension over cultural ideas

Carol Ann says

A book I come back to again and again.

Erik says

An important, balanced, well-written, and, indeed, timeless book about the culture wars. I recommend it to anyone trying to figure out what the hell just happened in America.

Justin Rose says

Hunter's book describes American cultures using a fair approach. His observations are still largely relevant in Americas cultures 20 years later.

Brent Barnard says

I don't remember getting much out of this book, though I didn't read too far past the first chapter or two.
