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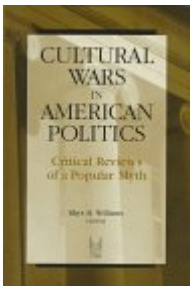

Rhys H. Williams, ed. *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth.* Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997. xii + 299 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-202-30564-6; $47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-202-30563-9.

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The Myth of Culture Wars

Readers of and contributors to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s on-line discussion on the alleged demise of the "culture wars" in early March 1998 may be surprised to learn that the ongoing debates revolve around something that was not all that real to begin with.[1] To paraphrase Mark Twain, it is not that the reports of the "culture war's" demise have been greatly exaggerated, as this work suggests, but that the existence of such a war has itself been greatly overblown by politicians, the media, and the academy.

In this collection of essays, Rhys Williams and twenty-two colleagues (all sociologists save for one political scientist, two members of religion and society departments, two political scientists, one anthropologist, and one statistical analyst) take issue with the notion that the United States is being wracked by divisive moral issues, resulting in a severe social polarization between liberals and conservatives. Proponents of this culture war thesis include Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan, 1995), Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), and especially James D. Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) and *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: Free Press, 1994). It is Hunter's works that are most often cited in the fourteen essays, for his contentions, it appears, serve as the most urgent arguments in support of the culture war's existence. His thesis is described as reporting "an increasingly volatile ideological polarization…in American society," reflected as "contemporary public discourse on social and moral issues as a war between two competing moral visions that have encompassed all Americans, religious and nonreligious alike. The cultural divide between the orthodox and the progressive is so prevalent that it cuts across religious and other distinctions that have long divided Americans, turning them into irrelevant anachronisms." No longer are Protestants and Catholics fighting over doctrinal disagreements, for example; rather, liberal ("progressive") Protestants, Catholics, and Jews join together to challenge conservatives ("culturally orthodox") members of the same faiths in the battles over "government spending, women's rights, sexual morality, social policy, political ideology, civil liberty, and so on" (p. 19).

In this scenario, based as it is on extremes on each

side, there is little middle ground for the moderates, who, according to the essayists in this volume, are often intellectually dismissed by adherents of the culture wars thesis; Hunter is quoted as noting that "it may be that there is a 'center' to American public opinion but if there is, it is statistical in nature and therefore contentless–it has no coherence or teleology as a system of moral public reasoning" (p. 216). This discounting of the center in favor of the extremes is echoed in the language of certain politicians (Pat Buchanan claimed at the 1992 Republican National Convention that the culture war is "as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America" [p. 39]). Yet it is precisely this vast and complicated middle ground, however, that the authors of *Cultural Wars in American Politics* seek to chart. If they can demonstrate that many Americans do not subscribe to the notion of social polarization and concomitant "overheated rhetoric," as Rhys Williams terms it, then the culture wars do not deserve such a name, for the generals (politicians, those in the academy, and the media) have no troops at their command (p. 3).

The authors do a commendable job of compiling evidence, statistical and otherwise, to illustrate that most Americans do not see themselves as fighting battles against demonic liberals or conservatives bent on imposing their moral standards on the nation. In the first section, "The View from Public Opinion Data," they use a variety of polling data, including the General Social Survey data from the National Opinion Research Center, to demonstrate that while Americans are divided along cultural, religious, and political lines, these divisions are often not clear cut, and are diffused rather than clustering around two polar opposites, even among religious elites.[2] Self-described religious conservatives ("the orthodox") may indeed hold more conservative views on the family-related issues (patriarchal family; women's role as nurturer in the home), but tend to hold more "progressive" views on the need for economic redistribution of wealth: "disagreement is more common than consensus in the opinions of the religiously orthodox, and the orthodox are sharply divided on many political issues along lines of race, class, or gender" (p. 57). While the debates around abortion have caused some polarization in American society, another study finds, on the whole, American attitudes have not become more polarized in the past few decades. In short, normal discourse and political disagreements are a far cry from anything that could be considered a culture war.[3]

The second section, "Culture Wars Within Institutions," examines in detail the conflicting ideologies in two Protestant seminaries, religion and the two-party system in the past two decades, Oliver North's failure to win the Virginia senatorial campaign in 1994, and the pluralistic nature of American Protestantism. In much the same fashion as the first section, these essays focus on the widely disparate, sometimes conflicting, but hardly bipolar issues that so concern Americans: debates within evangelical and liberal seminaries about doctrine and inclusiveness that take up far more time than debates between them; fears, even among religious conservatives, of the power of religious coalitions within the Republican Party, mitigated by the need of such coalitions to compromise their religious views in favor of currying favor with religious pluralists; and the primacy of economic concerns and the status of public education over issues of lax morality, pornography, abortion, and other cherished motifs of the culture wars.[4] Some findings clearly underscore the fact that the notion of "culture wars" is alien to a good many Americans outside national politics, universities, and the media. When asked what "secular humanism" meant, one churchgoing Methodist answered that "it referred to humanitarian efforts of good people to help the needy, like soup kitchens for the homeless." Even more startling to the researchers was that many people did not know if they belonged to the Religious Right or not; from July-October 1994, three different polls showed that anywhere from nine to twenty-two percent of Americans identified themselves with the Religious Right; a year later, "59 percent of the self-identified Religious Right thought that abortion should be legal in some circumstances, and 9 percent believed abortion should be legal in *all* circumstances. This is the Religious Right? It makes you wonder: maybe the 'Religious Right' is more a product of activists' and academics' projections than anything out there in the real world" (pp. 181-82).

Finally, the third section, entitled "Reconceptualizing the Battleground of American Politics," takes into account the differences between real culture wars in places such as Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Israel, and India, and the civility (or lack thereof) of democratic discourse in the United States and the 1984 presidential election as a case study in how both the "American Left" and the "American Right" draw upon notions of individualism and covenant/community standards (the former hews to individualistic notions of social and personal morality and a covenant community in economic issues, whereas the latter exhibits an individualistic attitude towards economic issues but a covenant community view of social and personal morality) (see pp. 199-219; 222-236). Two

other essays in this section examine similar data as the first section to demonstrate how Americans are pulled in a variety of ideological directions on any number of given subjects, such as the economy, education, morality, religion and politics, rather than two opposite extremes.[5]

The contributors have gone to great lengths in their attempts to disprove the notion that the United States has become polarized by culture wars, and that the debates on moral and political issues have turned into calls to participate in a jihad against one's ideological enemies. Clearly the discourse is more nuanced than that, and far less extreme, as illustrated by their judicious and careful use of polling data, statistics, interviews, and other evidence. This is not to suggest, however, that society is not confronted with a vast array of opinions on any given subject; it is the very existence of so many different points of view on almost all issues, save for that of abortion, that it is a mistake to limit the views to two polar opposites. Nonetheless, more discussion is warranted on the role of the *perception* of the continued existence of culture wars, and what that means for society. It is one thing to give a sigh of relief when, upon finishing this book, the time has not yet come to run to the barricades, but the tone of some of the essays, especially the one quoted at length above, about the existence of the Religious Right, downplay the problems that even a perceived culture war may still create. Only Daniel V.A. Olson explicitly addresses this issue when he writes that

more caution may be needed in making predictions of cultural warfare. This is partly because predictions of an impending culture war may help to bring about a culture war in much the same way that rumors of an impending bank failure help to create a real bank failure. Instead of listening, learning, and working out our disagreements together, we become suspicious, antagonistic, and divisive. By arming ourselves for war we make war more likely (p. 256).

Even if middle America does not acknowledge, understand, or even know of the much-touted culture wars, politicians in the Beltway and elsewhere may believe in and contribute to the existence of the culture wars through their actions and rhetoric, believing that they are following their constituents' wishes, and it is these people, who, with their perhaps misguided perceptions as to what the voters want, shape policy and determine whether programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts receive funding. Perhaps that is beyond the scope of the study, but further discussion of the powers of perception would have been welcome. As it stands now, *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth* is a needed corrective to the harsh and uncompromising rhetoric about the culture wars. Readers should appreciate its nuances and lack of sensationalism, but given the sales of the more typical fare on ongoing crises facing American morality put out by larger, better-known publishers, such a hope may prove to be as ephemeral as the culture wars themselves.

Notes

[1]. This discussion can be found at <http://chronicle.com/colloquy/98/culturewar/culturewar.htm$>$

[2]. See chapters by Demarath and Yang "What American Culture War?" and Timothy Shortell, "Religious Affiliation, Commitment, and Ideology Among U.S. Elites," pp. 17-38, 101-117.

[3]. See the chapter by Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson entitled "Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?", pp. 63-99.

[4]. The chapters in this section are as follows: Jackson W. Carroll and Penny Long Marler, "Culture Wars? Insights from Ethnographies of Two Protestant Seminaries"; Ted G. Gelen, "Culture Wars and the Party System: Religion and Realignment, 1972-1993"; Margaret S. Hrezo and Melinda Bollar Wagner, "Civility or the Culture Wars in Politics and Religion: Case Study of Oliver North in Virginia," pp. 121-144, 145-157, 159-174.

[5]. See Daniel V.A. Olson, "Dimensions of Cultural Tensions Among the American Public"; Fred Kniss, "Culture Wars(?): Remapping the Battleground," pp. 237-258; 259-280.

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