

CHAPTER 1

Culture Wars and Warring about Culture

American culture appears to be deeply divided: those who believe there are absolute moral truths contend with those who place moral authority in individual judgment. Armed with these competing visions, “orthodox” versus “progressive” culture warriors clash on issues of abortion, homosexuality, feminism, school prayer, multiculturalism, popular culture, and university curricula. The population is increasingly polarized as a result.

The problem with this image is that it is not supported by survey data. American public opinion is considerably more ambivalent and internally inconsistent than the image of a culture war implies. Most Americans are moderate or centrist in both their political and religious beliefs. Very few are consistently for or against abortion and same-sex marriage, for example.

Proponents of the culture wars thesis acknowledge that most Americans occupy a position between the polar extremes. The issue, they contend, is not about what people think or believe, but about the public culture—the meanings and understandings enunciated by elites who seek to frame how we think. The competing moral visions of these elites inexorably pull all arguments into one or the other of the contending camps, effectively eclipsing the middle ground.

The question thus becomes whether American public culture is divided

into the two opposing camps of the culture war, or whether both sides share the same American cultural ideas in propounding their differing visions. I find support for the latter view in my analysis of the 436 articles dealing with culture war issues that were published in four popular political magazines between 1980 and 2000. The culture war debaters in the pages of *National Review*, *Time*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation*—magazines representing the mainstream American political spectrum, from *National Review* on the right to *The Nation* on the left—adhere to remarkably similar cultural principles.

Rather than dividing along the lines of “orthodox” versus “progressive” morality, the arguments of culture war partisans are nuanced and riddled with internal disagreements. There are abortion rights supporters who regret the immorality of abortion and antihomosexuality advocates who dispute whether or not homosexual behavior is a matter of morality. The symbols and rhetoric of the two sides often mirror each other. Consider the following statement: “A culture that is at once moralistic, self-righteous, alienated, and in a minority will constantly be tempted to break the rules of political discourse.” Are these the words of a progressive describing the efforts of Christian Fundamentalists to influence American politics? No. This is a description of the Left written by a well-known conservative (Bork 1989, 27).

While there are doubtless persons for whom the binary logic of the culture wars is all-important, the elites represented in the pages of these mainstream media—the journalists and intellectuals, feminists and “family values” advocates alike—instead reflect shared cultural patterns. These discussions take place within the context of enduring American dilemmas—about the role of religion in politics and society, the tension between morality and pragmatism, how much individualism should be sacrificed for larger community goals, the meaning of pluralism in a “nation of immigrants,” and how to reconcile the will of the people with standards enunciated by elites.

Though they disagree about specific issues and policies, the partisans on all sides subscribe to the following ideas: (1) respect for religion but uncertainty about its role; (2) use of moral frameworks but without “moralizing”; (3) belief in individualism but not to excess; (4) respect for pluralism but within one culture; (5) ambivalence toward elites; and (6) a high regard for moderation. The first five of these items represent dilemmas to which

the high regard for moderation is something of an answer. Thus, religion is of great importance, but American society is both secular and diverse in its religions. Individualism is a supreme American value, but the needs of the community must be respected too. Ironically, the only unalloyed American virtue is that of moderation. Moderation, of course, does not constitute a dilemma. But the very vitality of moderation presents dilemmas for social movements. In a society that views as beyond the pale both ardent feminists and committed traditionalists, the strongly religious and atheists, fervent supporters and opponents of abortion, those who attempt to alter the culture are pressured toward a centrism that may be antagonistic to their basic beliefs.

While issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage may be new, the underlying dilemmas are of long duration. If every culture can be seen as “a kind of theater in which certain contrary tendencies are played out” (Erikson 1976, 82), these are classic American cultural conundrums. And though they may not be the only dilemmas in American culture, they are the ones that are central to the “culture wars.”

Participants and observers alike contend that the culture wars originated in the late 1960s, when challenges to traditional values were dubbed the counterculture. The very idea of a “counterculture” suggests a new self-consciousness about cultural struggles regarding values and lifestyles. In the trajectory from the counterculture to the culture wars, what is new is not the political struggle over cultural issues but rather a heightened awareness of culture itself and those who seek to shape it. Both social scientists and the general public have come to think of culture as changeable and contested. And a self-conscious competition for cultural dominance has become more evident. While the “social construction of reality” has not become a household term akin to “charisma” or “lifestyle,” an awareness of the provisional nature of social assumptions has “entered popular consciousness” (Wrong 1990, 28).

The Culture Wars

In one of the earliest and best-known portraits of the culture wars, James Davison Hunter (1991) described a fundamental split between orthodox and progressive views of morality and suggested that this divide cuts across

class, religious, racial, ethnic, political, and sexual lines. In the eyes of one partisan, the culture war is apparent in the simultaneous emergence of “moral disarray” and “moral revival” symbolized by the success of both gangsta rap and gospel rock (Himmelfarb 1999, 117).

A year after Hunter put “culture wars” on the social science map, Patrick Buchanan popularized the idea in his speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention. He told the audience in Houston that “a cultural war” was taking place, a “struggle for the soul of America.” The defining issues were abortion, homosexuality, school choice, and “radical feminism.” In the aftermath of this address, the idea of a “culture war” became a journalistic staple.

But for all the credence given to the idea of culture wars in the press, public opinion analysts present a different portrait (see N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996a, 1996b, 1997; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; J. H. Evans 1997; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005; A. S. Miller and Hoffman 1999; C. Smith et al. 1997; Wolfe 1998; Wuthnow 1996). Only small percentages of Americans are consistently orthodox or progressive on such issues as abortion, stem cell research, the morning-after pill, gay marriage, and gay adoption (Pew Research Center 2006b). And while “the gap between the ideologically consistent liberals and conservatives may have widened a bit,” there are now fewer Americans “in those fragments” than there were in the 1960s (Fischer and Hout 2006, 238).

Religious conservatives and liberals differ in their religious beliefs, however, and there is a loose correspondence between people’s religious identities and their views on abortion, homosexuality, and school prayer (N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996; Wuthnow 1996). But their views do not clearly differ with regard to the values and moral orientations that are prominent in American culture. Both are guided by self-interest and by what feels good; both are dedicated to work and family and the desire to secure a comfortable life. Differences in political and social views are more related to people’s religious activities than to their conservative or liberal religious philosophies. Those who participate actively in religion “are in substantial agreement on many aspects of their worldviews,” whether they are liberals, moderates, or conservatives (Wuthnow 1996, 326). Furthermore, the religiously orthodox do not take a conservative stance on issues of racial and economic inequality (N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996a); three-quarters of the members of this group favor sex education in public schools, and al-

most half support making contraception available to teenagers (N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996b, 235; Kohut et al. 2000, 64). Even among people who identify themselves as part of the Religious Right, some 30 percent are Democrats, and 60 percent think abortion should be legal in some circumstances (C. Smith et al. 1997, 182). Among committed evangelical Protestants, one-third believe that abortions should be available to women in circumstances other than rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother, and 41 percent of committed Catholics believe likewise (Kohut et al. 2000, 64). The proportion of conservative Protestants who are so consistently pro-life that they reject abortion even when a mother's health is at stake is only 3 percent, a figure that has not changed in recent decades (Greeley and Hout 2006, 125).

Not only do the religiously orthodox show "little ideological consistency across a broad spectrum of attitudes," but their attitudes also differ by gender, race, social class, and age (N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996b, 237). This finding runs quite contrary to Hunter's thesis that the fundamental divide between orthodox and progressive views cuts across all other social categories. Nor is there evidence of enduring alliances across faiths, as conservative Catholics do not share sociopolitical attitudes with fundamentalist Protestants (Billings and Scott 1994, 180). Older alliances between religious groups and political parties continue; to this day, white Protestants are a majority of those who identify with the Republican Party, while Catholics, Jews, and black Protestants are much more likely to be Democrats (Layman 2001, 301). Even among the orthodox, younger people hold more liberal views regarding sexuality and reproduction, gender, and racial issues (N. J. Davis and Robinson 1996b, 242). And the role of moral beliefs in predicting voting patterns and party loyalties appears to differ by gender, again suggesting that something other than a culture war is at work (Kaufmann 2002; Layman 2001).

The division between the progressive and the orthodox camps is not monolithic even with regard to religious doctrines. Thus, some one-third of religious conservatives do not believe the Bible should be taken literally, while almost 20 percent of religious liberals think it should be (Wuthnow 1996, 326). An ethnographic study of one evangelical and one mainline Protestant seminary found that although they maintain competing moral visions, "the more intense battles are internal to each culture" (Carroll and Marler 1995, 18). Among religious elites, such as seminary faculty, neither

side appears unified in opposition to the other (Olson and Carroll 1992, 778). Even if religious elites present positions as if they were internally consistent packages, group members show no such attitude consistency (Jelen 1990, 124). Furthermore, differences in religious beliefs are not necessarily reflected in actual behavior. Thus, the family behaviors of religious conservatives were not found to differ from those of religious progressives (Clydesdale 1997).

Within religious denominations, little evidence supports the idea of polarized views on culture war issues. Ironically, the one exception that has been found is among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. These presumptively orthodox groups manifest intradenominational ideological polarization (Demerath and Yang 1997, 35).

Remarkably, the attitudes of religious conservatives and liberals on most social and political issues converged rather than further differentiated during the 1970s and 1980s (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996, 729). Attitudes toward abortion may be the one exception. Evidence indicates greater polarization here, though this phenomenon peaked in the 1980s, and some analysts using different statistical techniques dispute the finding of polarization (Mouw and Sobel 2001). Evidence also shows increased internal division among both Catholics and mainline Protestants on the abortion question (J. H. Evans 2002). Yet in some ways, realistically, “there are not two political opinions on abortion—pro-choice and pro-life, but three. The third is ‘It depends,’ and is larger than the other two put together,” with large majorities of the population favoring abortion if pregnancy was the result of rape or if the mother’s health is in danger (Greeley and Hout 2006, 121, 123). Even with respect to this most polarizing issue, one recent poll found that 66 percent of Americans support finding “a middle ground,” and only 29 percent believe “there’s no room for compromise when it comes to abortion laws” (Pew Research Center 2006b).

Those who take extreme positions on the issue of abortion do not share a coherent worldview. Thus, pro-life supporters are deeply divided in their attitudes toward the death penalty, civil rights, feminism, and other social issues, while those most in favor of abortion are differentiated into liberal and libertarian camps. Despite their collaboration in antiabortion campaigns, the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention do not share cultural or religious outlooks, and even their antiabortion rationales differ substantially from each other (Dillon 1996).

The idea of multiculturalism also is less divisive an issue than some culture warriors suggest. Survey data show that while few Americans support the "hard multiculturalist" position that calls on the government to help racial and ethnic groups to maintain their original cultures, most Americans prefer an "inclusive nationalism" that "coexists with the widespread acceptance of pluralism in cultural practices." Faced with the option of having different ethnic groups "blend into the larger society" or "maintain their distinct cultures," 38 percent favored the melting pot position, 32 percent chose the cultural maintenance option, and 29 percent said neither. That a large segment of the public takes a middle position on this question suggests that many Americans do not view assimilating and maintaining elements of one's ethnic heritage as mutually exclusive (Citrin et al. 2001, 260). And while 63 percent favored designating English as the official language of the United States, only 37 percent agreed that ballots should be printed in English only (261).

Americans appear to manifest both a center-seeking tendency and strong ambivalence about culture war issues. Divisions between those who side with Ozzie and Harriet images of family life and those who align with Murphy Brown, for example, "do not take place between camps of people; instead, they take place within most individuals." In effect, "the culture war lies within" (Wolfe 1998, 111). While Wolfe's analysis is based on in-depth interviews with two hundred middle-class suburbanites, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope report similar results based on national surveys of "tens of thousands" of Americans (2005, 8).

Perhaps such ambivalence is understandable in light of the contradictory pattern of American values. In the World Values Surveys, Americans' high level of adherence to traditional values (strong beliefs in God and religion, conservative family values, absolute moral standards, and national pride) resembles that shown by the populations of developing and low-income societies. At the same time, however, Americans are attached to self-expression values: "No other society is as traditional and as self-expression-oriented as America" (Baker 2005, 39). Since traditional values and the quest for self-realization may dictate contradictory behaviors, it is no wonder that Americans may experience conflicts over culture war issues and may simultaneously embrace both sides of the debate. Significant numbers of Americans, for example, believe both that homosexual behavior is immoral and that homosexuals deserve civil rights (Loftus 2001). Conserva-

tive Protestants are more willing to censure homosexuals but are no less supportive than are other Americans of hate crime laws designed to protect gay men and lesbians (C. Smith 2000, 226).

Data from the World Values Survey also suggest that between 1981 and 1990, Americans became almost evenly divided between “moral absolutists,” who believe there are clear guidelines about good and evil, and “moral relativists,” who believe that what is good or evil depends on the circumstances. This polarized distribution persisted through the 1995 and 2000 surveys (Baker 2005, 79). But such polarization does not indicate the presence of a culture war, since these moral visions are only loosely linked to attitudes and beliefs. Whether people are moral absolutists or relativists, they “tend to share similar religious beliefs, cultural values, and attitudes about social issues and policies” (104).

The orthodox and progressive camps thus are not polarized about social policies. Close elections may reflect not a deeply divided electorate but rather an ambivalent one that is closely divided about the choices offered by political elites who have become more polarized (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, 8, 14–15). For example, a 2003 poll found that although weekly churchgoers are only half as likely to favor legalization of homosexual relations as those who never attend church, 40 percent nevertheless favored such legalization (89). And the single largest disparity found in 2000 between voters in “red” and “blue” states was the 16 percent difference between the 60 percent of Democrats who support gays in the military and the 44 percent of Republicans who do (26). There is little connection between party affiliation and views about abortion, despite the party alignments with “pro-choice” and “pro-life” slogans. The population may well be more divided over such labels than over the actual policy alternatives, just as women are more likely to approve of government policies to improve the status of women than they are favorably inclined toward the term *feminist* (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, 63). Over time, as the labels have become more widely known, religiously orthodox people have become more likely to categorize themselves as “conservative,” and religious progressives identify themselves as “liberal,” even though their attitudes on issues have not changed. This phenomenon would account for “the paradox of a perceived increase in divisiveness despite a lack of empirical support at the individual level” (A. S. Miller and Hoffmann 1999, 728).

It is not clear that the majority of Americans attach great political

significance to cultural issues. When asked to name the most important problems facing the nation or to discuss party differences, less than one-third of National Election Survey respondents in 1992 mentioned a cultural matter (Layman and Carmines 1997, 765), despite the emphasis on cultural issues at that time. Most churchgoing Protestants are not interested in fighting culture wars (C. Smith et al. 1997, 192), and attitudes among Evangelicals are as complex and ambivalent as they are among most Americans. The vast majority of Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and conservative Protestants do not think that public schools should teach Christian values and morals or that teachers should lead classes in spoken Christian prayers. At the same time, however, members of these groups believe that public school instruction should include Christian views of science and history (C. Smith 2000, 206). Evangelicals disagree among themselves about whether to seek “Christian cultural hegemony” or to stress “liberty and pluralism” (36). Furthermore, no “single evangelical elite [speaks] in accord”; evangelical leaders are all over “the political and ideological map” (7).

For political attitudes and behavior to be consistent with the culture wars thesis, voters not only must see cultural issues as salient, they must also perceive the ideological or values standpoints underlying an array of different policy questions and must link a political party to a particular ideology. Such consistency of attitudes and viewpoints has not been commonly found in public opinion and political behavior. It is thus not surprising that an examination of the 1992–2000 National Election Studies finds that culture wars operate only rarely. And contrary to the culture wars thesis, such factors as race and religious denomination still make a difference. Thus, more religiously committed black Protestants are still more likely than their less devout counterparts to align themselves with the Democratic Party and with liberal political views (Layman and Green 2006). It would appear, then, that the culture war thesis does not apply to the majority of Americans.

James Davison Hunter has acknowledged that “most Americans occupy a vast middle ground between the polarizing impulses of American culture” and that “public discourse is more polarized than the American public” (1991, 43, 159). But he maintains that the culture war is not a matter of public opinion, about what is in people’s heads or hearts. Rather, it is about the public culture. And in this culture, elites on both sides of the dispute force attitudes or opinions into their molds, thereby eliminating

the middle ground. The two sides are in a struggle “over the meaning of America” (50). Individuals “become subservient to” or “must struggle against the dominating and virtually irresistible categories and logic of the culture war” (1998, 14). The culture war is “*not* reflected so deeply in public sentiment” (Hunter and Wolfe 2006, 93). But this does not mean that there is a centrist consensus. Rather, “the competing moral visions in public culture” are “a reality *sui generis*” (Hunter 1996, 246). Any coherent center that may exist is eclipsed by “the grid of rhetorical extremes” that either labels moderates as “wishy-washy” or judges them by the standards of the extremists—so that, for example, a moderate conservative on issues of homosexuality will still be dubbed a homophobe (247). Those who argue against the culture war hypothesis are engaged in “a denial of deep difference” (Hunter and Wolfe 2006, 36).

But to critics such as Alan Wolfe, a “culture war is not autonomous from the people who fight it. It has no reality of its own” (Hunter and Wolfe 2006, 100). There is also no reason to assume that people become “subservient to” the opposing logics of culture war rhetoric (Demerath and Straight 1997, 216). People can and do sustain inconsistency and ambivalence within their beliefs. This is not to deny that the opposing visions themselves have social effects. As A. S. Miller and Hoffmann (1999) have pointed out, people who come to identify with one side may feel increased antagonism toward the opposing side. Evidence suggests, for example, that anti-Fundamentalists harbor negative stereotypes about Christian Fundamentalists (Bolce and De Maio 1999a, 1999b). But people may also adhere selectively to the ideas of each side.

Hunter argues that the culture wars are about the power to define reality, to create and shape meaning. With competing worldviews in contest, the representatives on each side seek to project their “vision of the world as the dominant, if not *the only* vision of the world, such that it becomes commonsensical to people” (Hunter 2004, 5). If this is the case, a struggle over the soul of America is indeed taking place, despite the absence of polarization in the population.

How, then, can one determine the truth of the assertion of a culture war? How does one study the “public culture” or tap into the “deep differences” within contemporary American culture? Hunter’s initial discussion of the culture wars focused on the advertising and persuasive literature emanating from culture war organizations and spokespersons. Yet scholars have long

recognized that organizations and movements that seek public support tend to state their claims in exaggerated form. To overcome inertia and to motivate financial contributions, they emphasize the dire consequences of doing nothing or allowing the opposition to prevail. The public culture clearly encompasses more than the rhetoric of fund-seeking partisans.

Hunter recognizes that culture war issues filled “the nation’s newspapers, magazines, and intellectual journals” (1991, 176), yet he focused on the sixty-second commercials, full-page advertisements, sound bites on the evening news, op-ed pieces, and direct mail letters that resulted in “much of public discourse” being “reduced to a reciprocal bellicosity” (170). Despite the “extremism and superficiality” of these sources, Hunter argued that they provided “the only objectification of the debate that really exists” (170).

But why should one make this assumption? Since the elites who shape the public culture express themselves in many venues, it seems rather arbitrary to define “public discourse” in such narrow terms. An analysis of the opinions and assumptions presented in large-circulation political magazines offers an excellent opportunity to test the culture war thesis. The journalists, academics, public intellectuals, and political figures whose writing appears in these magazines offer a representative array of the partisan views that constitute the public culture. I have also supplemented the magazine articles with selected works by writers whose names are associated with the culture wars—figures such as William Bennett, Allan Bloom, Dinesh D’Souza, Thomas Frank, Francis Fukuyama, Henry Louis Gates, Roger Kimball, and Michael Walzer.

Hunter has argued that “within the contemporary public discourse, one risks being branded a ‘right-winger’ by even invoking moral criteria. Indeed, the very word ‘morality’ has become a right-wing word” (1991, 323). And “the concept of religion or transcendence is also very often dismissed by secular progressivists as ‘right-wing’” (324). My analysis of the writings of partisans on both the left and the right does not support such hyperbolic images. Rather, the spokespersons for both sides have “drawn on the same symbolic code to . . . advance their competing claims,” as J. C. Alexander and Smith found in their analysis of discourse within earlier American civil debates (1993, 197).

An empirical test of the culture war hypothesis is of some significance to both social scientists and the general public. For the most part, empirical researchers have tended to reject the idea of a culture war based on sur-

vey data, while those who defend the hypothesis have done so without empirical research into the “deep culture” whose existence they claim. I hope that a systematic study of the public discourse about culture wars will shed light on the topic in a way that goes beyond the persuasive analyses of survey researchers.

There is, of course, an intuitive appeal—a surface plausibility—to the culture war idea, given the differences in the ideas espoused by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Patrick Buchanan, on the one hand, and feminists, gay-marriage advocates, and abortion-rights supporters on the other. Even some social scientists are so wedded to the culture war concept that they behave like the proverbial pessimists who see only the doughnut hole. Thus, they see only divergences within the population where other analysts see convergences. John Kenneth White, for example, argues that a “values divide” exists in American politics, with one side emphasizing “duty and morality” while the other stresses “individual rights and self-fulfillment” (2003, 65). Citing a 2000 Zogby poll that asked whether there are “absolute moral truths that govern our lives,” he reports that among those who classified themselves as “very liberal,” 48 percent agreed and 46 percent disagreed, while among those who saw themselves as “very conservative,” 74 percent agreed and 25 percent disagreed. He concludes that “the values divide between liberals and conservatives . . . has become a chasm” (66). But surely there is room for disagreement about whether this degree of difference constitutes a “chasm” or a culture war.

Why does it matter whether there is or is not a culture war? A society experiencing a culture war would face grave difficulties. It would lack common standards and assumptions, and as a result, the ability to make public policy decisions would be severely compromised. Indeed, a society without such common ground could barely function. It is instructive to recall that after *Culture Wars* appeared in 1991, Hunter’s next book was titled *Before the Shooting Begins* (1994). My analysis of American public culture suggests that such images are unwarranted.

Warring over Culture

The culture war debates are embedded within a larger contention concerning the nature of culture itself. Unlike the culture wars, however, disputes about the concept of culture are not new. The term *culture*, used in the an-

thropological sense to describe how people think and behave, is generally traced to the 1870s. It was popularized in the 1930s and became an essential part of social science. Yet as early as 1952, some sociologists and anthropologists rejected the concept as “so broad as to be useless in scientific discourse” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 5). Half a century later, the utility of the concept is questioned not because it is too broad but because it is too precise. Critics argue that *culture* implies a degree of structure, coherence, and stability that is not found in social reality (Brumann 1999).

The reigning image of culture in the 1950s was that of a set of basic values internalized early in life and shaping one’s very being. By the end of the twentieth century, culture was more likely to be viewed as a “toolkit” (Swidler 1986), a repertoire of skills and styles, “a pastiche of mediated representations” (DiMaggio 1997, 267).

Even in the early 1950s, however, Kroeber and Kluckhohn were cautious about the sway of a unified culture. They noted that whole cultures are composed of varying and overlapping subcultures and that “each individual selects from and to greater or lesser degree systematizes what he experiences of the total culture” (1952, 157). In a complex society such as ours, there is overlap “only upon the broadest of issues” (114). Yet Kroeber and Kluckhohn assumed that values were the key to the unity of cultures. Without reference to values, any account of a culture becomes “a mere laundry list,” they argued (173). By the late twentieth century, the idea that culture shapes behavior through values or ultimate ends was largely rejected, as was the idea of culture as something deeply internalized.

Beginning with Dennis Wrong’s classic 1961 article, “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology,” the idea of culture as a deeply internalized “latent” pattern that accounted for most human behavior came under attack. Wrong argued that individuals had more independence from culture than sociologists recognized, if only because of biological characteristics or presocialized unconscious minds.

In the 1970s, Clifford Geertz reoriented the study of culture to public and symbolic meanings. He argued that culture should be seen neither as a “super-organic reality” that exerts pressure on people nor as the attitudes and beliefs lodged within people’s hearts and minds. Rather, culture is the context within which things become intelligible. It contains “webs of significance,” an interpretive search for meaning. “Culture is public because meaning is” (1973, 12).

A focus on public symbols allowed analysts to avoid questions of how

widely shared or consensual the culture is (Swidler 2002, 313). The analysis of public culture also might fail to appreciate the extent to which some public cultures may represent “the authorized beliefs of a society about itself” (Swidler 2001, 213). Nevertheless, Geertz’s work was very influential.

But Geertz’s idea that culture should be understood “through the (recording and) interpretation of the publicly available forms in which it is encoded (the ‘symbols’)” did not come to grips with the problem that culture may no longer be “‘contained’ in a location and/or attached to a particular group” (Ortner 1999, 6–7). Television, for example, makes such containment problematic. Symbols are now “conveyed by media to individuals without the co-presence of other human beings” (Schudson 1989, 154). Television anywhere in the world contains an “articulation of the transnational, the national, the local, and the personal,” making it difficult to continue to assume that any particular culture is the only or the most powerful way “to make sense of the world” (Abu-Lughod 1999, 129).

Given the multiplicity and complexity of cultural ideas in the contemporary world, the view of culture itself had to change. In the newer view of culture, as people draw on local, national, and global sources of cultural ideas, such “ideas never form a closed or coherent whole” (S. Wright 1998, 10). Cultural “worlds of meaning” are normally “contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable” (Sewell 1999, 53). Indeed, in complex contemporary societies, attempts to pin down the “mainstream” or “dominant” culture often lead to the “intellectually embarrassing” result that “homogeneity may vanish like a mirage” (Hannerz 1992, 80). It becomes “harder to say from what normative cultural world a particular sub-culture deviates” (Eagleton 2000, 75). However, at least one anthropologist suggests that distinctions between earlier and later conceptualizations of culture are exaggerated. Marshall Sahlins has argued that early American anthropologists were too individualistic to assume that cultures were monolithic or coherent. Rather, he suggests, contemporary anthropologists appear to be applying “the historiographic principle . . . of attributing to one’s predecessors the opposite of whatever is now deemed true” (1999, 404).

Be that as it may, by the late twentieth century, earlier notions that a unified culture determined behavior were increasingly called into question. Research in cognitive psychology suggests that “our heads are full of images, opinions, and information, untagged as to truth values to which we

are inclined to attribute accuracy and plausibility" (DiMaggio 1997, 267). Some ideas are more accessible than others, and cues in the environment may bring them to the surface. But the fact that the images are internally inconsistent does not appear to affect people's ability to retain and act on those images. Such cognitive research challenges earlier assumptions that culture is acquired only through socialization, and it suggests that people have the capacity to participate in multiple cultural traditions (267–68).

In 1986, Ann Swidler suggested that only a "loose coupling" existed between culture and action. Culture provides people not with a set of values or ultimate ends that shape their behavior but with "strategies of action"—skills, styles, and informal know-how. People draw selectively on these cultural "tool kits." Individual adherents to the culture absorb things selectively and inconsistently, remaining ambivalent toward some aspects of the culture or even adhering to some cultural codes in which they do not really believe (giving Christmas presents, for example) (Swidler 2001, 163).

Though the tool kit image suggests that culture does not determine human behavior, Swidler acknowledges that "when culture fully takes, it so merges with life as to be nearly invisible" (2001, 19). Conversely, an increased consciousness of culture may mean that there are fewer experiences of such "unmediated apprehension of how the world is put together and how we should conduct ourselves in it." Whenever "culture is recognized as culture," detachment and doubt result (Carey 1988, 11). Indeed, the very idea of culture wars suggests that such simple apprehension no longer exists.

A number of scholars have attempted to pursue a middle ground between a deterministic view of culture—in which culture shapes human action—and a more voluntaristic position that allows for greater individual agency in selecting from the available cultural repertoires. Schudson, for example, has argued that neither of these positions is entirely satisfactory. Instead, he suggests that "sometimes culture 'works' and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the media cultivate attitudes, sometimes not; . . . sometimes ideas appear to be switchmen, sometimes they seem to make no difference" (1989, 158). There is no "universal truth with respect to these problems" (Robertson 1992, 34). In a similar vein, Vaisey (2007) has argued that culture provides both motivations and justifications for action. The justifications are conscious and are chosen from the available tool kit, while the motivations may be deep-seated and largely unconscious. Swidler, in contrast, has argued that at least some of the time, culture may

have powerful effects when it is *not* deeply internalized (2002, 315). Sheer knowledge of the public code exerts pressure on people to give Christmas presents or to acknowledge their secretaries during National Secretaries Week or their mothers on Mother's Day. In such situations, "one is constrained not by internal motives but by knowledge of how one's actions may be interpreted by others." If one does not follow the code, one "may need to negotiate a way around it" (2001, 163).

Struggles over the rethinking of culture are occurring in all the social sciences. Within sociology, the tradition stemming from Emile Durkheim's late-nineteenth-century images of culture as a thinglike external force competes with newer images of the "social construction of reality" (P. L. Berger and Luckmann 1966). And whereas religion has always been at the "core" of studies of culture, those who study the sociology of culture today tend "to ignore religion altogether" (Casanova 1992, 33). Presumably, if culture is no longer about deep-seated meanings, religious understandings are no longer central.

Within anthropology, earlier traditions of ethnographic accounts portraying culture as a whole contend with arguments about whether the concept of culture remains useful. An anthropologist notes that the discipline has largely avoided the study of popular culture even though those in "cultural studies" who do study popular culture use definitions that should be attractive to "an anthropology that attempts to think of cultures as fragmented, hybrid, deterritorialized, and mutually entangled" (Traube 1996, 128–29). But another anthropologist points out that while contemporary scholars generally view culture as "unbounded," "neither 'boundedness' nor its absence is *given* in the world." Therefore, "to say a priori that 'cultures' are not 'bounded' . . . is misleading since local discourses *do*, in fact, establish authoritative traditions" (David Scott 1992, 376).

A political scientist contends that "the concept of 'political culture' or 'common knowledge' with which most political scientists operate presupposes an internal coherence and stability that is indefensible empirically." Political scientists are instead urged to think of culture as the practices through which "social actors attempt to make their worlds coherent" (Wedeen 2002, 720). An American historian notes that following the demise of "consensus history" in the post–World War II period, the emphasis shifted from an examination of "static national values to contingent state structures and political processes" (Rodgers 2004, 32). In lieu of a stable culture, one now assumes change and contingency.

Nevertheless, older ideas of culture often remain “embedded in our teaching,” as introductory textbooks portray cultures “with unproblematic boundaries” and describe them in terms of “uniform and internally integrated traits” (Goode 2001, 435). Such simplifications no doubt have their uses. But perhaps, too, they occur because people want to see culture “in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized, and timeless fashion that most of us now reject” (Brumann 1999, 511). While we recognize that individuals share certain “commonalities in thought and behavior” because of their membership in the same family, gender, age group, social class, ethnic group, and so forth, there remain characteristics that many Japanese share and that differ from those of Americans (Brumann 1999, 57).

Just as anthropologists are denying the existence of cultural boundaries, people all over the world are consciously and conspicuously marking such boundaries (Sahlins 1999, 414). Within the United States, people increasingly differentiate themselves from others by using the term *culture*—whether it is the culture of a particular corporation, the culture of the deaf, or the cultures attached to various forms of popular entertainment. In contemporary Western discourse, “we now literally *experience* difference as culture” (David Scott 2003, 103). Perhaps the summation of one social scientist is apt: “we cannot do without a concept of culture” (Sewell 1999, 38).

In what appears to be the dominant view, then, culture is no longer seen as a total way of life that evolves among a distinct people and is transmitted to their children, who internalize and reenact it. Yet there is far from total consensus on the understanding of culture as something that is fluid, contested, and changing. Consider the following contrast. Swidler maintains that culture does not exert influence “via enduring psychological proclivities implanted in individuals by their socialization. Instead, publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others” (1986, 283). James Davison Hunter, conversely, contends that culture is a matter of “commanding truths so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in the habits of our lives that to question them is to question reality itself” (1994, 200). Here lies perhaps the ultimate culture war. Is culture a thinglike reality that exerts control over us, as Hunter sees it? Or is it “a contested area, . . . inflected with politics” (Suny 2002, 1485), a matter of struggle and inequality rather than consensus (P. Smith 1998, 3), “a political process of contestation over the power to define key concepts, including that of ‘culture’ itself” (S. Wright 1998, 14)? If the latter view is accepted, then culture wars and multicultural-

alism become normal features of society. Indeed, when “culture no longer refers to *shared meanings* that reflect a people’s way of life,” the political nature of culture becomes clear: “*cultural practices* refer to the many institutions, classes, and groups that compete in the articulation of the social meaning of things” (McCarthy 1996, 26). It is no wonder, then, that some analysts perceive not a culture war but a class war or a series of political conflicts.

Academic arguments about the nature of culture are thus not as far removed from disputes about culture war issues as they might appear to be. At the most fundamental level, whether a culture war is really taking place may hinge on how one understands culture. It is probably not accidental that the originator of the culture wars concept within sociology views culture as something unitary and internalized. Though he asserts that culture is always contested (J. D. Hunter 2004), Hunter nevertheless conceptualizes culture as a matter of internally consistent and deep normative structures. If the “deep culture” is a unified entity, disagreements appear as culture wars. By contrast, those who adhere to the newer views of culture do not see a single transcendent culture war. Instead, they perceive multiple spheres of contention, significant internal disputes, and a shifting array of players and policy disputes.

Furthermore, culture war contentions may appear and disappear over time. Some disputes are resolved by an emerging consensus, and new ones arise. Thus, some of the controversies originating in the 1960s (for example, whether wives should work and whether premarital sex is always wrong) have been largely resolved, while others (homosexuality and same-sex marriage) have become more salient (Fischer and Hout 2006, 229–30). At the end of the 1990s, even Evangelicals expressed more support for women’s participation in both the labor market and politics than had been the case a decade earlier, though Evangelicals still prefer traditional family arrangements when children are involved. And though they are much less accepting of homosexuality than is the rest of the society, Evangelicals manifest greater tolerance than they did earlier (McConkey 2001, 169, 172).

Sometimes a culture war dispute disappears because the particular provocation is removed. Thus, the intense controversy over funding for the arts is “now over—not because we now have agreement on the meaning and value of the arts, but simply because there is neither a policy issue at stake, nor any sort of media attention on debates within the arts” (Kidd

2006, 6). Without specific provocations such as those surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of gay men or Andres Serrano's photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, the larger issue has been removed from public consciousness. The two-decade-long war over the university canon likewise appears to be of less concern now. The public is no longer engaged by the "canon wars"—disputes over what constitute essential or "classic" works to be included in university curricula.

Perceptions of the specific issues of contention in the culture wars are also significantly influenced by how one views culture. Multiculturalism, for example, is attacked or defended through the lens of one's understanding of culture. Curiously, multiculturalism has been attacked for both underestimating and overestimating the influence of culture. The idea of multiculturalism has been found wanting by those who subscribe to both older and newer understandings of culture.

James Davison Hunter alleges that multiculturalists fail to recognize that culture is a matter of norms and values that are deeply embedded within us. "Within multiculturalism literature, culture is essentially reduced to life-style (choices about how one lives) or, at best, customs (practices that have the sanction of tradition but are not insisted upon as inviolable)." Multiculturalists assume that the individual is "free and independent from culture, unencumbered by moral commitments defined by virtue of one's membership in a community. But culture is much more pervasive, powerful, and compelling than is allowed for in the liberal understanding of the self. . . . By reducing culture to a product about which individuals may choose, multiculturalism further renders culture as a trifling matter" (1994, 200–202). Bernstein argues similarly that multiculturalists do not really know or care much about culture: "The paradox is that the power of culture is utterly contrary to the most fervently held beliefs and values of the advocates of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a movement of the left. . . . But culture is powerfully conservative. Culture is what enforces obedience to authority, the authority of parents, of history, of custom, of superstition. Deep attachment to culture is one of the things that prevents different people from understanding one another" (1995, 6). And a historian has argued that in our zeal to imagine "a soft multiculturalist notion of a syncretic America," we may well minimize "the pain of cultural brokerage, . . . leaving Pocahontas Disneyized." Those cultural brokers "who were once reviled as 'half-breeds' of treacherously inscrutable

loyalties, emerge now as transcultural virtuosos, able to shift performative identities at will" (Rodgers 2004, 39).

Multiculturalists are also criticized for failing to appreciate the unity and integrity of culture. "A culture is, after all, a complete way of thinking, feeling, and viewing the world. It is not a smorgasbord from which the diner can select his favorite bits and pieces at will." Multiculturalists operate with "a general ignorance of what a culture is" (O'Sullivan 1994a, 40). "A moral tradition is an organic whole," says another conservative; one cannot accept only some of it. Making homosexual activity acceptable, for example, will generate questioning of the whole tradition (Klinghoffer 1998, 26).

From the vantage point of those with the newer view of culture, however, Hunter, Bernstein, and others are "cultural fundamentalists" who are frightened by "the flimsiness of a culture where everything is in motion and authority has perpetually to prove itself . . . and the fragments of identity are on sale everywhere from the university to the mall" (Gitlin 1995, 223). Multiculturalism appears to make a mockery of deeply implanted normative structures.

Critics who accuse multiculturalists of overestimating the significance of culture, however, allege that multiculturalists make every group appear to have a culture of its own, so that we become incapable of understanding each other across cultural barriers. As one observer puts it, the multiculturalists "have created a cult of incommensurability. But if the differences between individuals and groups were as thick as the multiculturalists think, then not even multiculturalism would be possible. Everybody would be shut up in subjectivity" (Wieseltier 1994, 30). In "the exaggerated post-modernist perspective" to which some multiculturalists adhere, human beings are "pure products of cultural context," so that no understanding or communication between cultures is possible. This idea not only is false but "provides intellectual backup for a political outlook that sees no real basis for common ground among humans of different sexes, races, and cultures" (Ehrenreich and McIntosh 1997, 15, 16). Multiculturalists treat culture as if it were "a fixed entity, transmitted, as it were, in the genes, rather than through experience" (Chavez 1994, 26). Left and Right converge here in critiquing the exaggerated influence that some multiculturalists impute to culture.

As these critics of multiculturalism see it, no contemporary group can

maintain a firm culture. "The onslaught of economic, organizational, and technological change inexorably erodes the very ground on which one's parents walked" (Gitlin 1995, 206). While multiculturalism harbors the "presumption that grandparents are destiny," contemporary individuals can choose their cultural affiliations. Though there is "a common prejudice to the effect that affiliations based on choice are somehow artificial and lacking in depth, . . . superficiality does not follow from volition any more than authenticity follows from submission to tradition and authority" (Hollinger 1995, 119). After all, "the depth of . . . involvement is often greater among converts than among birthright members of a particular religious community" (121). And the allegation that those who change religions are not "morally serious" is belied by such phenomena as the pro-life activists who convert to Catholicism or those who switch religious denominations because of agreement with the "moral culture" of their new groups (R. S. Warner 1993, 1076-77).

Given the hostility toward multiculturalism from those with very different understandings of culture, it is perhaps not surprising that no commentator in our twenty-one-year sample of political commentary defends the basic concept of multiculturalism. To be sure, some writers are more hostile to the idea than others, and some offer support for educating students about cultural diversity, but enthusiasm for the fundamental concept is strikingly absent.

Arguments about the workings of culture are also implicated in the culture war debates concerning popular culture. Reflecting the greater likelihood that progressives will adhere to the newer view of culture, most commentators on the left do not see any one-to-one relationship between popular culture and actual behavior. By contrast, those on the right are more likely to see popular culture, art, literature, and other symbolic fare as directly affecting behavior. An editorial in *National Review*, for example, argues that people who watch TV talk shows "will find it harder to reject other kinds of behavior that are wrong but less extravagantly perverted, like conventional adultery" (Editorial 1995b, 18). A liberal commentator, by contrast, suggests that although "the culture now has a surfeit of coarseness, from noxious rap lyrics to the Jerry Springer Show," there is no evidence of moral decline (Whitman 1999, 18).

Progressives similarly attack what they see as a "simple one-to-one correlation between books and behavior" in the debate over the university

canon. If people are divided, as they have always been, about “what kind of country they want,” then “books cannot mold a common national purpose” (Pollitt 1991, 331). It is also wrong to treat works of art as if their purpose is “therapeutic.” “Imbibe the Republic or Phaedo at 19, and you will be one kind of person; study Jane Eyre or Mrs. Dalloway, and you will be another” (Hughes 1992a, 47).

Progressives thus appear to attribute greater autonomy or agency to individuals in the face of cultural symbols than do the conservatives. Yet at least one conservative, unwilling to tolerate government censorship of cultural materials, suggests that the sex and violence in contemporary popular culture do not have dire consequences. He agrees with those who argue that “as an influence on the development of my children, my words and my example outweigh . . . anything Britney Spears does. . . . It’s the culture—but it doesn’t matter; it does no great harm” (Derbyshire 2000, 34). Similarly, at least one progressive acknowledges that cultural imprinting can have significant effects. Although we are aware of the social construction of cultural categories, they often act “as needless calcifications,” he says. We know that “cultural definitions of sexual and gender unorthodoxy have shifted over time. . . . Most of us, alas, however attracted to the theory of infinite malleability, have been trained in a culture that regards sexual appetite as consisting of two, and only two, contrasting variations—gay or straight. And most of us have internalized that perhaps false dichotomy to such a degree that it has become as deeply imprinted in us—as immutable—as any genetically mandated trait” (Duberman 1993, 22).

Commentators from all sides acknowledge the pervasiveness of popular culture and the difficulty of disentangling one’s own thoughts from those disseminated by the media (Gibbs and McDowell 1992; Labi 1998; Morrow 1994a). Conservative writers are more likely to find these influences pernicious and to attribute power over the culture to the Left. “Culture shapes our lives and affects every action we take,” says one such commentator, and “the current epidemics of drug use, AIDS, and crime are testimony enough to the power of culture to influence our lives. Just think how implicated the cultural agenda of the Left has been in these disasters,” since the Left’s literature, music, and films have “glorified every kind of libertinism and polymorphous perversity” (Lipman 1991b, 53).

Despite disagreements about where power lies, most commentators

subscribe to the idea that culture is ultimately made by people in their ongoing social interactions. Though conservatives assume that “most people aren’t pleased to have their most cherished values challenged” (Hyde 1990a, 26), while progressives assume that traditions are or should be “open to criticism and renegotiation” (G. Graff and Cain 1989, 312), the idea that culture is socially constructed and changeable appears to be shared by all. Writers on the left and in the center may use the language of “social construction” more frequently than those on the right, but all seem to share some version of the following idea: “Each of us in our daily lives helps shape the cultural images and assumptions that define the limits of the permissible” (Pollitt 1990, 24). Debates about the meaning of Columbus, for example, are seen as a way of reinventing ourselves, overturning earlier myths and replacing them with new ones (Gray 1991). More generally, “America is a construction of mind. . . . America is a collective act of the imagination whose making never ends” (Hughes 1992a, 44). What is discussed in the culture wars is a matter of the redefinition of morality—“a process in which all Americans, from born-again to New Age to agnostic, are already participating” (Judis 1999, 56). A *National Review* writer notes that if we capitulate to the demands of the multiculturalists, we might “create a self-fulfilling prophecy” and produce a multicultural society, though none currently exists in the United States (Chavez 1994, 26). And a well-known conservative describes the process through which a culture can erode over time. He argues that the essentially WASP American character, rooted in hard work, civic-mindedness, and individual consciences, has come under attack. “The danger is not that a new post-WASP personality will emerge. A nation’s character is not so mutable; it takes major upheaval—revolution, conquest—to transform it. What is possible, however, is that the character America already possesses will slip into chronic malfunction. Most of us will keep behaving the way we always have, without knowing why, while the rest will act differently, simply for the sake of being different.” (Brookhiser 1993b, 79). We are not powerless to change the culture, another conservative suggests, as the example of smoking illustrates. In the not-very-distant past, “the culture and its sustaining icons (Humphrey Bogart for example) loved smoking. Today smoking cigarettes is disreputable. . . . Change the myth and the values follow” (Morrow 1995, 90).

The Culture Warriors

Those who participate in the culture wars are, of course, intensely aware of the struggle for control. As each side attempts to define the culture while fearing its opponents' ability to do likewise, a kind of mirror imagery appears in descriptions of the struggle. The Left says that at issue is "a powerful movement to impose intellectual and cultural hegemony on the whole society. The New Right agenda not only includes compulsory prayer; it demands compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory sobriety, compulsory racism, sexism, and imperialism" (Editorial 1984, 308). The Right, in turn, explains "the Left's cultural agenda" as consisting of "primitivism, feminism, racialism, multiculturalism, and sexual radicalism. The Left wishes to . . . destroy every traditional social habit and institution, including churches and ending with the family" (Lipman 1991b, 38). If a critic on the left portrays the culture war as a contest between questioning authority and *Father Knows Best*, between self-expression and deference to norms (Ehrenreich 1993b, 74), an observer on the right suggests that what "drives the culture war" is "the power of rationalization" that convinces people that "heretofore forbidden desires are permissible," whether such desires are homosexuality or abortion (Reilly 1996, 60).

The two sides fear each other's influences in very similar ways. A commentator on the left cries out, "How long are we going to let conservatives define the national agenda on social issues?" (Tax 1995, 378). And from the right, the question is, "Why is culture formed so completely by the Left, rather than by the Right?" (Lipman 1991b, 38). Those on the right argue that support for the traditional family goes against "the reigning orthodoxy" (Marshner 1988, 39) and subjects one to "the charge of being a bigot, a religious nut, or just hopelessly out of touch" (Tucker 1993, 28). On the left, the contention is that "it's even harder to get a serious public hearing for a radical critique of the family than for a radical critique of capitalism" (Willis 1996, 22). The Right accuses American society of a form of religious intolerance, suggesting that "culture makers" bear a "disdain bordering on contempt . . . for the deeply religious" (Krauthammer 1998, 92). The Left argues that it is not possible in American society to "mock religious belief as childish" or to "describe God as our creation" because such sentiments violate "the norms of civility and religious correctness" (Kaminer 1996, 24).

Both sides fear that their opponents have gained the upper hand in

framing the debates, in constructing the cultural realities. On the right, there is concern that the gay movement has succeeded in defining a reality that makes opposition to homosexuals appear to be bigotry (Editorial 1998c, 16). On the left, there is fear that the Christian Right's definition of acceptability has made all gays seek to demonstrate that they're just as worthy (Ireland 1999, 16).

Each side sees inadequacies in its own efforts to shape the culture. Conservatives worry that their relative absence in the culture-producing industries—the arts and entertainment—has left audiences more vulnerable to the opposition's influence. Without leadership from conservative culture makers, audiences have continued "their passive consumption of cultural artifacts and thus acquiescence in the dominant values" (Lipman 1991b, 53). Progressives, conversely, are worried that they have been so absorbed in calling for cultural diversity that "we on the left no longer know what we want from cultural life, nor what we should demand from culture" (Kriegel 1984–85, 714).

There is mirror imagery, too, in the motives that each side assigns to its opponents. The Left argues that the culture wars are a right-wing effort to distract attention from the increasing inequality of income and wealth. "It's the culture, stupid" (di Leonardo 1996, 25). The Right, in contrast, suggests that for the Left, "culture—or rather cultures—replaces economics as the engine of revolutionary social change"; "power to the cultures" replaces "power to the people" (Lipman 1991a, 40).

Each side accuses the other of "politicizing" culture. If the Left has argued that "the personal is political" because issues of feminism, abortion, and gay rights cannot be handled on a purely individual or personal level, the Right sees this as "politicizing." The Left politicizes everything, conservatives have argued, by taking private behaviors—such as homosexual acts—and bringing them into the public sphere. "The idea that one must be either in the closet or out of it is an invention of those who would politicize sex and abolish privacy" (Short 1990, 44). When conservatives see politicization within their own ranks, it is with dismay. Thus, "the politicizing of religion" is seen as disastrous for both public life and religion (Neuhaus 1988a, 46). For the Left, however, the Right "politicizes" culture when it disputes revisions of university curricula or the funding choices of the National Endowment for the Arts. As seen by the Left, the campaign against funding the National Endowment for the Arts is part of "the populist right's broader agenda" (Editorial 1995a, 152); it is based on "an amal-

gam of high culture reactionaries, antigovernment ideologues and faux populists" (Pollitt 1997, 10).

The Left accuses the Right of denying its own—inevitably political—stances. Thus, conservatives' "uneasiness and sometimes distaste for minority subcultures: blacks, women, gays" goes along with "a tendency to advance a supposedly depoliticized (which means strongly political) view of culture that sees it as a museum of fixed consensual values" (Howe 1984, 29). The Right, in turn, accuses the Left of being "determined to politicize" culture to undermine and destroy traditional habits and institutions (Lipman 1991b, 38).

The mirror images of the contending culture warriors—the idea that criticism of the family is not acceptable versus the idea that the traditional family is out of fashion; the idea that one cannot criticize religion versus the idea that serious religious conviction is out of bounds; the idea that culture wars are a cover for increasing economic inequality versus the idea that they compensate for the failure of egalitarian ideas—reflect an underlying social reality in which both sides are true. Americans are highly individualistic, yet they endorse the importance of the family far more than their European counterparts do (see van Elteren 1998, 70). Americans are highly religious but uncomfortable with extremists of any stripe. Americans are egalitarian in ideology but uncomfortable talking about class; thus, cultural issues cover for economic ones. The values of both sides in the culture war appear to be strongly present in the American population.

Perhaps only in America does a conservative who sees the traditional family as in tune with "the facts of human nature" nevertheless feel it necessary to argue that teaching children about family values does not inhibit self-expression. We need to train children in these traditional family values to help them understand their own nature, she argues. Children so trained are nonetheless free to reject these values when they mature, which is "why, contrary to what the relativists insist, instilling them is not oppressive" (Marshner 1988, 40).

American Culture

Can one subscribe to the newer view of culture and still speak of an entity called American culture? Can one refer to American culture without doing

violence to empirical reality? To some extent, nations exist as “symbolic communities” and “define themselves in opposition to one another.” Being anti-American, for example, may help to define some French people (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 185). But is there some essence that defines American culture?

If one contends that there is no “war” over “the meaning of America,” how is this meaning to be defined? Over the years, various analysts—most notably, perhaps, Robin Williams (1957), Herbert Gans (1980), and Seymour Martin Lipset (1996)—have produced lists of core American values. However credible these lists may seem to be, they remain both static and simplified. They fail to indicate the ambiguities and contradictions attached to each particular trait.

While most adherents to newer understandings of culture reject the idea of values as central in understanding behavior, I argue that the values discussed are rarely held without ambivalence. It is not simply that people’s actions do not reflect the ideals of the culture in a straightforward way. Each value is accompanied by competing concerns, ambivalences that do not allow for simple enactment. As Slater has noted, every culture frustrates some needs by emphasizing others. Thus, American individualism repeatedly frustrates needs for community and dependence (1976, 8–9), and such frustrated needs inevitably exert cultural pressures.

If Americans are notoriously individualistic, what exactly does that mean? Survey data over many decades substantiate an American devotion to laissez-faire policies and the belief that each individual is responsible for his or her fate. But individualism is not a unitary phenomenon (Fischer 2000; Halman 1996). If Americans are supremely devoted to economic individualism, they are simultaneously concerned about the excesses of individualism and the need for community. They also place more credence in traditional authorities than the citizens of other advanced technological societies do.

American devotions to religion and morality, to pluralism and populism, are likewise riddled with inconsistencies and paradoxes. If Americans are more given to religious and moral thinking than are citizens of most other technologically advanced nations, they have never resolved how much religion and morality should be matters of public consensus and how much should be left to the individual conscience. Americans have wrestled with issues of religion and morality in ways that manifestly differ

from those of their European counterparts, who have not experienced the extremes of a constitutional amendment banning alcohol or the outright ban on prostitution, for example.

Lipset and others have argued that unlike other nations, whose citizens belong as a matter of birthright, the United States was born out of revolution, and its unity hinges on a shared creed. In Europe, for example, "one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American" (1996, 31). Lipset's critics reject the idea that a set of enduring values can explain American history and politics, maintaining instead that values result from at least as much as they cause institutional practices and historical events. Lipset acknowledges the role of institutional factors in producing values, noting that "a new settler society, a Bill of Rights, Protestant sectarianism, wars, and the like" have produced American values. Nevertheless, he asserts that these values "result in deep beliefs, such as deference or antagonism to authority, individualism or group-centeredness, and egalitarianism or elitism, which form the organizing principles of societies" (25). Such an approach minimizes the roles of both human agency and power differentials and exaggerates the degree to which one end of each polarity is dominant.

Some adherents to newer understandings of culture question the utility of the concept of values. Swidler argues, for example, that American individualism should not be seen as a "value." Rather, it represents the idea that action depends on individuals' choices. And the "individualistic way of organizing action can be directed to many values, among them the establishment of 'community'" (1986, 276).

If many contemporary scholars are willing to abandon the concept of values and to question the idea of well-defined cultures, others continue to assert that "deep culture is more than the epiphenomenal product of political and economic arrangements" (Wuthnow 2006, 28) and that cultural assumptions often make change difficult. Assumptions about "individualism and the American dream," for example, may "make it difficult to confront inequality and discrimination" (Wuthnow 2005, 363). Yet as Bennett Berger has observed, culture entails "a continuing historical process" in which "the meaning of none of the key terms is fixed over time" (1995, 39). Indeed, many aspects of the "American Creed" can be seen as persisting while being subjected to change, conflict, and the evolution of new mean-

ings. American culture is embodied in enduring dilemmas rather than enduring values.

To some extent, the very religiosity and morality that appear to inhere in the American Creed may help to generate conflicts. Many scholars have argued that Americans are among the most religious people in Christendom because voluntaristic sects rather than hierarchical churches have dominated American religious institutions. "The sectarian is expected to follow a moral code, as determined by his/her own sense of rectitude, reflecting a personal relationship with God." The American sects have thus "produced a moralistic people" (Lipset 1996, 19–20). Conflicts about public policy are "intense" and "morally based" as "people quarrel sharply about how to apply the basic principles of Americanism they purport to agree about" (26).

From this perspective, the contemporary American culture wars can be seen as an outgrowth of characteristically American culture patterns. Cultural politics are certainly not new in American life, even if earlier manifestations were not labeled as "culture wars." Contentions regarding the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of alcohol, and the reading of the Bible in public schools, for example, were of major importance in earlier American politics.

Like earlier cultural politics, the contemporary culture wars take place within the parameters of some enduring cultural patterns. These patterns are a matter not of stable values but rather of a series of dilemmas that are revisited as new issues or situations evoke them. Dilemmas about the role of religion and morality, about individualism, pluralism, and populism, constitute American culture. In each case, as my analysis of public discourse in the culture wars shows, there is no simple solution. American culture is not a matter of either/or but rather of both/and. There is thus no simple or unitary "culture war," no "struggle for the soul of America."

If the contemporary culture wars differ from those of the past, it is only because we have become increasingly aware of such contention and increasingly conscious of the tenuousness with which all cultural ideas are held. One does not need to be a sociologist to recognize the speed with which ideas about sexual practices, for example, have changed. Premarital sex has become the norm. Homosexuality has lost its exoticism. Indeed, gay activists were well aware that the more their members came out of the closet, the less difficult the struggle for acceptance would become. Self-con-

scious efforts to shape cultural meanings are now part of the political agenda.

The chapters that follow explore each of the American cultural dilemmas in which the culture wars are embedded through the lens of two decades' worth of political commentary. Where data are available concerning public sentiments on these issues, these data are incorporated into the narratives. Also addressed are historical and theoretical arguments concerning the larger issues—for example, questions about American religiosity and civil religion, the nature of American individualism and pluralism, and how multiculturalism is related to individualism. Although there is more agreement among the cultural antagonists than is usually imagined, there is also more internal disagreement within each camp than is usually acknowledged. These internal divisions are explored in the penultimate chapter, which assesses the current forms of polarization in American society, whether they result from an “American exceptionalism,” and whether the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections demonstrate the significance of the culture wars. A brief concluding chapter offers observations on ongoing cultural change.