Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

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One staple of American political discourse is defining one’s opponents as elitist while portraying one’s own side as reflecting the will of the people. All sides in the culture wars manifest this tendency. What is unusual here is only the number of elites at issue, since every sphere of culture wars contention is characterized by splits between the leadership and the grass roots—in the churches as in the arts world, among gays as among feminists. Yet as with all the polarities under discussion, ambivalence and a willingness to praise or emulate the elites also exist.

Who Are the Elites, and What Is Elite Culture?

While conservatives may eschew the language of cultural politics, the two sides nevertheless converge in recognizing that some actors are more powerful than others in influencing the culture. Conservatives clearly see power in the hands of an “establishment” or “new class” or “knowledge class” whose tastes and values conservatives dislike. Sometime during the 1960s, says one conservative commentator, “the power of explaining America to Americans fell to a liberal, sometimes radical ‘new class’—academics,
elitists, journalists—which, although accurate up to a point, somehow got the story wrong or told it from a vantage point of supercilious and frequently privileged hostility” (Morrow 1981, 73). The “Woodstock Generation elites” are very powerful now, says another conservative, though their views are not widely shared. But one must distinguish between such elites and a “true cultural elite” that “stands by enduring values” (Buckley 1992a, 54). “The traditional moral imperatives of self-restraint and delayed gratification” are currently absent because culture-transmitting institutions—mainline churches and universities—have “almost entirely gone over to liberationism” (Editorial 1988a, 22).

Media elites are an obvious target of attack from all sides. The Right asserts that media elites are less religious and more socially liberal than the population at large and are therefore “out of touch with the public” (Editorial 1981b, 533). As the Right sees it, parents are left struggling to inculcate values that the media ignore, attack, or “aloofly patronize.” The media do not praise marital fidelity, for example, or appreciate the struggles of wedlock (Novak 1984, 48). When the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding gays in the military was not eliminated, a National Review editorial noted that “conventional sexual behavior and morality was shown to have stronger social roots than the media normally allow” (1993a, 14). Since many media people are remnants of the 1960s counterculture, they “remain cultural revolutionaries” who exert their influence on the general culture despite their “alienated” and mistrustful stance toward American society (Bork 1989, 27). Liberals have an inside track with such cultural institutions as book publishers, a position that allows liberals to engage in behind-the-scenes censorship of school textbooks by lobbying sympathetic publishers, rather than by launching public challenges and court cases such as those brought by conservatives. In the eyes of sympathetic people in the book publishing industry, “critics who wanted books to feature more working women were a ‘positive pressure group,’ those who wanted more homemakers were ‘censors’” (Bates, 1993, 69).

By contrast, the Left is concerned about the “rise of a veritable Culture Trust” that controls the major media, seemingly with little popular concern or opposition. Amazingly, the population has bought into the “great Myth of the Culture Trust” that there are many channels from which to choose (Tom Frank 1996, 16). People fail to see how fundamentally similar all of the channels are and fail to recognize that although capitalists themselves
promulgate messages that appear to be against the system, being “hip” is no longer an oppositional stance. To resist “puritanism, homogeneity and conformity” is no longer a means of dissenting from the system. Capitalists endorse such resistance, thereby sidetracking popular discontent (18).

It is not entirely clear who is a part of the cultural elite. Are Hollywood and TV writers to be included? The Right appears to think so, but the Left is uncertain. Thus, Michael Kinsley noted that Vice President Dan Quayle’s attack on *Murphy Brown* represented in part an attempt to blame the “cultural elite” for what ails our society (Kinsley 1992b, 6), but Katha Pollitt found it strange that Quayle thinks of TV writers as part of a cultural elite rather than as “crowd-pleasing lowbrows” (1992a, 88).

In the eyes of some culture warriors, the culture war itself is provoked by errant elites. Thus, William J. Bennett defines the culture war as a battle between “elite” and “mainstream” America, where the elites are liberals who “belittle mainstream American values.” The public, he argues, “has been too quiescent and too accepting about what has been inflicted on them from the upper strata of society,” though they “are regaining the confidence to express publicly the common sense sentiments they hold privately” (1992, 13, 256).

If those on the right characterize cultural elites—whether in the media, the arts, or schools and universities—as subscribing to liberal ideas, those on the left suggest that the contents of popular culture depend largely on the profit motive that drives economic elites. Commentators in *Time* take note of the economic realities that underlie television content. Thus, the 1997 television season contained an unprecedented number of shows with religious themes, as “people have begun to seek out the comfort of religion in all aspects of their lives—even on TV.” Nevertheless, “the young and the reckless still rule. Sinners, after all, have killer demographics” (J. Stein 1997, 98, 100).

By contrast, a writer in *National Review* during that same year suggested that television shows about religion remained scarce relative to the interest of the American population. He also noted that the viewing population had succeeded in giving high ranking to *Touched by an Angel*, a show panned by critics, while making a flop of *Nothing Sacred*, a show about a with-it Catholic priest who saw the Bible as irrelevant to abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex (Gahr 1997, 44, 45). In this version of reality, the good sense of the people may override the foolish liberalism of the
elites who construct the media content. While this populist sentiment appears on both the left and the right, the audiences in question appear to differ.

While crediting the intelligence of average Americans over that of the critics, conservatives may also suggest that lower-class populations are all too easily influenced by the images they receive from the liberal media elite. As one conservative commentator notes, “common sense suggests that the pictures of the world disseminated by cultural elites would have an impact over time.” Justifying their actions on the basis of white indifference and failure to provide jobs to ghetto residents, black and Hispanic gang members are echoing TV commentators, whose statements are picked up from the culture elites (Rothman 1992, 35). In contrast, a liberal commentator remarks that “young African Americans are not so naïve and suggestible that they have to depend on a compact disc for their sociology lessons.” They know that police stereotype and arrest blacks more than whites for the same offenses. Critics of rap music imagine “empty-headed, suggestible black kids, crouching by their boom boxes, waiting for the word.” This view is clearly false (Ehrenreich 1992a, 89). An editorial in The Nation similarly contends that the “culture war” propagated by the 2000 Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominees “implicitly portrays American teens as empty vessels at the mercy of corrupting entertainment” (Editorial 2000c, 3). And a writer in The Nation notes that those who wish to censor certain publicly funded artists manifest a “faith in the power of images” that “appears to involve a deep suspicion that seemingly decent Americans will be overwhelmed by dark forces within them that such images might unleash” (Mattick 1990, 356).

It is easy to see that the interests of various groups influence their perception of media influences. Thus, a conservative writer who decries the influences of Hollywood points out that “liberal activists who denounce Joe Camel as a pied piper of social coercion swear that screen idols have no influence on human behavior. Television executives who make billions of dollars off the persuasive power of 30-second commercials declare that the 26- and 54-minute programs those ads punctuate have no net impact on their views” (Goldberg 2000, 62).

If media elites have undue influence, those on the left see this phenomenon as a consequence of the economic interests represented by the major media. The media, they contend, are necessarily biased in a conser-
ervative direction. As a result, they find political correctness on the left to be newsworthy while ignoring that on the right. No attention is paid, for example, to the removal of a painting commemorating a 1912 strike from a congressional hearing room (Pollitt 1998a, 10). Nor is any notice given to what really destroys our language and thinking: the “everyday lying and jargon,” the newscaster babble, that is “sanctioned and promulgated at the highest levels of media and politics”—terms such as *business community* and *peace process* (Hitchens 1991, 472).

The media’s conservative bias is also evident in portrayals of contemporary social movements. The “conservative counterrevolution” against feminism leads to “a mediawide misimpression that young women are marching back into the kitchen with virginity intact” (Alterman 1999, 10), that women are rejecting feminism (Pollitt 1994a, 224). And the gay movement is dominantly represented by conservatives, as a small number of gay writers appear in all the media and promote ideas that “range from right to far right” (M. Warner 1997, 15).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Right and Left converged in their attacks on the media for being run by elites or elitists who are out of touch with the people. In a 1950s incarnation of a similar convergence, the attack was on mass or popular culture itself. At that time, the Left feared media manipulation of the masses and the dumbing down of the population through market-based entertainment, while the Right feared that mass culture would drive out high culture and diminish or trivialize cultural standards. By the end of the century, both sides disowned the earlier critique of mass culture, with portions of the Left now seeing the populace as smart enough to resist manipulation and portions of the Right disavowing cultural elites that produce immoral, antibourgeois art. At the same time, well-educated segments of the population appeared to have shifted from being “highbrow snobs” to being cultural “omnivores,” with 95 percent of college graduates in one survey agreeing that “excellence is just as likely to be found in folk culture or popular culture as in traditional high culture” (Peterson 2002, 36).

The degree to which antielitism has grown since the middle of the twentieth century can be illustrated by examining almost any critic of mass or popular culture during that era. For example, a well-known sociologist of popular culture wrote in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1950, “We wish to know whether the consumption of popular culture really presupposes a
human being with preadult traits or whether modern man has a split personality: half mutilated child and half standardized adult” (Lowenthal 1950, 332). It is hard to imagine any of today’s culture warriors on the right or the left subscribing to such sentiments.

Distinctions between popular and high culture had become suspect by the late twentieth century as observers recognized that what merits elite status in the cultural realm is a matter of social construction and the power to confer it. In an era when a major art museum (the Guggenheim) presented an exhibition titled The Art of the Motorcycle, the older distinctions made no sense. Yet what exactly belongs in the mainstream remains a matter of dispute.

One writer looks at contemporary American popular culture and declares that whereas a mainstream culture once existed, there are now “two streams: one traditional and tranquil, the other torrential and caustic.” At midcentury, “there was a single official pop culture: white middle class, mid-cult, status quo.” Today, this group remains tranquil, but there is a large pop culture that is based on the rage of those who are ignored: the homeless, the junkies, the insane, the ghetto underclass, and “the young white working class, in tattered towns and trailer parks, who feel left out of bland, sitcom America” (Corliss 1990, 97). Another commentator in the late 1990s suggested the presence of a new countercultural trend. Unlike that of the 1960s, however, it is “inchoate” and neither united nor political. Growing up around alternative music and the Internet, its members seek original identities and are “far more sophisticated and authentically nonconformist than Woodstock Nation ever was.” But theirs is an “apolitical tribalism. . . . The belief in a singular ‘system,’ and a ‘counterculture’ in opposition to it, comes from a time when there was a consensus reality constructed of centralized media, personified by the three TV networks” (Sirius 1998, 88–89).

A liberal defender of middlebrow culture suggests that “it provides some unity in a culture where political, social, and intellectual fragmentation is now the norm.” Highbrow culture, he argues, “has never been so high—so removed from daily discourse. And lowbrow has never so mesmerized the masses or carried such highbrow chic. . . . We have lost appreciation for the art that was once the mainstay of American culture and the unguilty delight of intelligent readers, listeners, and viewers.” Middlebrow art “appeals across barriers of age or station” because it offers both amuse-
ment and instruction. It also engages with the world and can produce social change, as novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Jungle* illustrate (Friend 1992, 24, 27). A writer in *The Nation* applauds this defense of middlebrow culture and reinforces the suggestion that accessible art can change minds and hearts (Pochoda 1992, 344).

Another progressive writer contends that a “democratization of culture” has taken place, so that the barriers between high and low culture have broken down, much to the displeasure of social conservatives (Willis 1996, 22). And indeed, one noted conservative art critic decries the fact that “all distinctions between high and low culture, including outright trash, are considered too invidious to be given a hearing.” In fact, he argues, the priority given to “the lowest forms of popular culture and media entertainment at the expense of literature and the fine arts in the ‘quality’ press is now so advanced that it amounts to a cultural revolution. So does the politicization of reviewing, where the tenets of political correctness and multiculturalism are now regularly substituted for criteria of aesthetic judgment” (Kramer 1993, 37). Another critic agrees that “high art in America is dying” (Brustein 1992, 38).

A commentator on the left suggests that the “sleaze and moral degradation” of contemporary popular culture is less worrying than the “brutality and emptiness of our political culture.” The excesses of TV talk shows demonstrate the problem. “Pop-bashing is the humanism of fools: In the name of defending people’s dignity it attacks their pleasures and their meager store of power. On talk shows, whatever their drawbacks, the proles get to talk. The rest of the time they’re told in a thousand ways to shut up” (Willis 1996, 23).

To be sure, even this supporter of the “proles” who “get to talk” on television talk shows notes that they are often subjected to “the manipulative condescension of their producers and hosts” (Willis 1996, 23). And as noted earlier, some progressives suggest that these programs merely exploit the poor and minority groups. In addition, not all progressives see cultural democratization as a good thing. Thus, what some progressives perceive as the “democratization” of culture others see as “a consequence of the left’s inability to make distinctions. Because we tend to see all cultural expression as a manifestation of political ideology, ideology itself has ceased to serve any definable purpose, except as a leveler of distinctions. As a result, cultural life is overwhelmed by nonsense. . . . It was the left that favored
education in the humanities for all; it was the left that wanted to make cultural life widely available. . . . When those of us on the left called for cultural diversity, we questioned, justifiably at the time, the obeisance to Western culture that pervaded American colleges and universities.” But this “cultural politics . . . was disastrous. . . . Courses in the humanities became manifestations of race, of ethnicity, of regionalism or of class. And by allowing all values, all opinions, all feelings, all ideas—no matter how ridiculous or ill-conceived—to be considered equally, we made humanistic education a minor branch of what might be called ‘arts for living’” (Kriegel 1984–85, 714). Irving Howe has noted similarly that “the deep suspicion of the making of distinctions of value”—long part of American populism—has “found a prominent place in the universities” since the counterculture of the 1960s (1991, 42).

The debates about the university canon appear to pit academics against their critics. This situation is unfortunate, says one liberal commentator, because there is clearly something wrong “if society no longer wants to listen to its intellectuals, and if intellectuals cannot bear to hear how they are judged by society.” Academics argue that specialization of knowledge is required and even that it makes thought possible. “This is an outrageous claim. It implies, among other things, that outside of universities people do not think.” This goes along with the elitism that sees “popular” books as inevitably being too simple (Todorov 1989, 26, 28).

While writers on the left and the right share an undertone of populist distaste for elites, the attacks on elites for behaving in a self-serving fashion appear more prominently from conservatives. The elites in question are those whose work is seen to influence the culture. Not just artists, intellectuals, and academics, but experts in the school system and supporters of multiculturalism come under such suspicion. The Right sees those who support multiculturalism as part of an establishment that is out of touch with reality. “It is only the political class and the intelligentsia” who do not know that there is a common American national identity (O’Sullivan 1994a, 45). “Multiculturalism is not a grassroots movement”; it would die without government support (Chavez 1994, 32). And immigrants themselves are not the problem. They are here because they believe in American values. The problem lies in an indigenous overclass intent on balkanizing American society and exploiting immigrants and the poor to that end (Neuhaus 1995, 66). Elites either “acquiesce in” or “actively promote”
balkanization (Custred 1997, 40). Immigrants do not seek bilingual education; indeed, the gap between the advocates of such education and their “putative beneficiaries” is widening (Editorial 1990b, 14).

Those who promote multicultural education and design sex education curricula are particularly vulnerable to the Right’s accusations of elitism. Thus, “multicultural professionals . . . often earn exorbitant incomes peddling identity. Thousands of consultants with little or no real experience sell feel-good programs to school systems across the nation” (Chavez 1994, 30). And mainstream sex educators advocate “the kind of anti-majoritarianism conservatives fear most: a group of experts who use the power of government to reinvent the culture” (Mindus 2000, 46). “Just as the cigarette makers wanted to get the kids hooked on their product, so the sexologists want to get the kids hooked on theirs” (Bethell 1997, 36).

In the eyes of conservatives, both secular and religious elites are guilty of “cowardice and silence” in response to the assault on family and religious values in the schools and the media. The leadership of the mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religions as well as of the Republican and Democratic Parties is chastised for seeming to acquiesce to current politically correct fashions (Simon 1993, 21). While “feminism and sexual liberation are the religion of the intellectual class in America,” only the elite wants feminism; the people do not (quoted in Gibbs 1992, 54). The increasingly dumbed-down nature of American masculinity—where men’s culture is defined in terms of sex, sports, beer, gadgets, clothing, and fitness—is also to some degree a function of the cultural elite’s response to feminism. As areas of public life such as business and politics that once “inculcated a form of refined masculinity” have become “unsexed,” and as men’s clubs and schools have been “de-gendered,” men need to find something in common beyond beer and gadgetry. While the reestablishment of single-sex schools and colleges and all-male clubs could help, “a decent amount could be accomplished simply by stopping the intolerance of such things that now passes for civilized consensus among American elites” (Sullivan 2000, 6).

Before Roe v. Wade, abortion was supported by the “elite culture” of the “knowledge class.” The “democratic culture” has subsequently organized its response (Neuhaus 1989b, 42), and mainline churches are reconsidering their proabortion positions because of grassroots pressures (M. P. Harris 1988, 44). Decisions about abortion “must not be imposed by elites, or by
institutions subservient to elites, or in the obscurity and mists, penumbras and prejudices of elites” (Novak 1997, 48). Those fighting to outlaw abortion must “unseat the social ideal of radical individualism” by “persuading or displacing the elite that fostered that ideal” (Cunningham 1992, 46–47). The population is more religious and more conservative than its leaders and has begun to express discontent. While the media focus on the Moral Majority and “the wilder manifestations of the emerging reality,” they have ignored “the deeper and broader social currents, thereby proving again that they are out of touch with the public” (Editorial 1981b, 533).

Some on the right see the establishment as having engineered its own downfall by attempting to co-opt the 1960s counterculture. Instead, these “primitive forces” have taken over; the new elites prefer “primitive authenticity” to “learned sincerity” (Lipman 1991a, 40). The “Mapplethorpe Wing of American culture” now dominates “elite cultural opinion” (Buckley 1992a, 55).

**Elitism and Funding for the Arts**

To many conservatives, artist Robert Mapplethorpe became a symbol of the distasteful art that was being supported by cultural elites and subsidized by unwilling taxpayers. But the very definition of what constitutes elitism in the arts is a matter of considerable contention. Is the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) elitist because it supports “an irresponsible avant-garde” or “snobbish un-American homosexuals” or insufficient numbers of minority grantees (Brustein 1997c, 30)? Or is it elitist to assume that ordinary Americans are not interested in the humanities and that culture should be the private property of those who can pay for it (Hughes 1995, 65)?

While opponents view the NEA as elitist because it takes tax dollars from lower-income Americans and benefits wealthy patrons of the arts, supporters counter that the NEA helps nonestablished artists and minorities, the young, the poor, and the “provincial.” Without the NEA, American public culture would depend wholly on corporate support and thus would reflect the interests of one class, one race, and one mentality (Hughes 1990, 47). Defenders of the arts also note that political leaders such as Vice President Quayle, who beat “the populist drum on cultural and moral matters” and attacked the “cultural elite” for undermining American values, are
themselves part of the elite. Quayle is the millionaire son of media millionaires (Hughes 1992b, 43). Observers have also suggested that conservative Republicans were free to criticize the “cultural elites” in the arts and humanities because these audiences were no longer so dominantly Republican (Jensen 1995, 28).

The controversy surrounding federal funding for the arts drew such high-level political figures as Republican speaker of the house Newt Gingrich and Senator Henry Hyde into writing articles against the NEA. Gingrich argued that Americans should not be forced to pay for “political statements masquerading as art,” should not be required to support views that contribute to our “cultural fraying” instead of our unity, and should not be “forced to underwrite cultural dependents who add to our decay and undermine our values” (1995, 70, 71). Hyde similarly proclaimed that the public need not pay for offensive art or art that reflects merely the narcissistic self-expression of the artist rather than a quest for the good, the true, and the beautiful. Yet the two disagreed about the desirable outcome. Whereas Gingrich thought that removing cultural funding from the federal budget was the solution, Hyde hoped that such a drastic measure would not be necessary since it would mean that “we simply can’t reach agreement on a reasonable approach to issues at the intersection of politics and culture,” a result that would be “deeply saddening” (Hyde 1990a, 26).

Some on the left, by contrast, have no problem endorsing art that is “overtly political.” “The demand that art must be representative of the whole community or must be universally accepted . . . is reminiscent of that used in totalitarian states to condemn any work of art that does not represent the whole community or that breaks with convention” (Neier 1980, 376). Some traditional art critics’ animus against the “misdeeds of the NEA” may reflect their sense that it reflects a loss of their own power (Mattick 1990, 356). And in the climate of the culture wars, the arts have become “scapegoats, grotesquely politicized culture-war stereotypes,” so that many people now believe that preserving the NEA means preserving “sodomy, blasphemy, and child abuse” (Hughes 1995, 66). Conversely, at least one liberal who disapproves of the NEA is concerned that it offers little money to the arts while wielding lots of power as a consequence of the prestige associated with its grants. This combination of little money and lots of control “is the worst of all possible worlds” (Chait 1997, 16).

All sides are concerned about the incompatibility between the interests
of the art establishment and those of ordinary citizens. Some on the right argue that given this incompatibility, a libertarian argument is the best solution: let artists do what they want, but don’t make taxpayers fund it (Ferguson 1989, 21). An editorial in *The New Republic* similarly contends that “taxpayers ought not to be expected to support displays that do violence to deeply held community values” (Editorial 1989, 6).

Both the Left and the Right accuse the art world of remaining aloof from the world of ordinary people. Some liberal commentators suggest that the lower classes’ concerns and tastes are excluded. Arts producers and consumers display a “broad condescension” toward working people, who “sense that their lives and opinions are uninteresting to arts-world decision makers” and whose “rage was there long before it was tapped by . . . right-wing churches” (Spillane 1990, 739). In controversies regarding the placement of art in public squares, the rights and interests of those who use those spaces must be considered more important than the aesthetic value of the art. A commentator on the left thus argues against placing Richard Serra’s large sculpture, *Tilted Arc*, in New York’s Federal Plaza. Despite his personal admiration for the sculpture as a work of art, this commentator opposed such a placement because the public “has an interest in not having all of its open spaces treated as though they were museums” (Danto 1985, 776).

Observers on the right perceive that the art world has deliberately chosen to distance itself from the respectable world of the middle classes. Because the members of the bourgeoisie are afraid to look bourgeois, they are no longer shocked by art and are willing to pay high prices for Andy Warhol’s soup cans. The NEA funds whatever the arts community produces because it too is afraid to look bourgeois, with the result that artists have become more violent and lewd and the public taste is further corrupted (Berns 1990, 35–36). Some on the right question whether offensive art—such as Mapplethorpe’s photography and Serrano’s *Piss Christ*—is indeed art as opposed to political statement (Buckley 1990b, 62).

Yet some commentators on the left defend the arts and art institutions against the charges of elitism. Unlike so many other institutions, “American art institutions are among the most zealous in reaching out. . . . How else explain the preoccupation with multiculturalism, the debate over quality, the effort, with whatever success, to dismantle the barriers of race and gender? (The contradictory fallback position of those who can’t get the
label ‘elitist’ to stick is that arts institutions are too ‘politically correct’!” (Danto 1997, 6). Those who condemn the excesses of multiculturalism and political correctness indeed suggest that being politically correct means being “deeply skeptical toward the very idea of a ‘masterpiece,’ because it implies that one idea, culture or human being can actually be better than another” (Henry 1993, 74).

Those concerned about the fate of art fear that the very controversies about artistic merit have been detrimental because the effort to avoid political controversies has made public art increasingly bland. Artists increasingly must fend off criticisms from all sides of the political spectrum—from “religious and cultural conservatism” as well as “identity politics” and “ordinary philistinism” (Grant 1999, 47). And the increased pressure against subsidizing provocative art may lead some theater producers, for example, to “decide that survival is more important than social commentary” (Yeman 1998, 33).

**Ambivalence toward Elites**

While elites in many areas of American life may be seen as out of touch with popular sentiment, they nevertheless remain objects of respect and emulation. Indeed, the conflict between elitism and democratic populism plays itself out in a variety of spheres, with commentators from both conservative and liberal perspectives siding with the elites. Thus, a conservative commentator has argued that “the idea of the gentleman has been part of American culture from the earliest days” (Hart 1996, 52). Though it emanates from the English model, its American form is characterized by “self-control, subordination of the ego, understatement, respect for solid achievement, courtesy (especially to social inferiors), respect for women, family responsibility, professional obligation, respect for education, regard for athletics” (55). To be sure, “the whole idea of the gentleman is an offense against the idea of social equality.” But then the extreme individualism of the American literary canon also “constitutes a polemic against the leveling tendencies of democratic culture.” Despite the leveling pull of democracy, “the idea of the gentleman has been a powerful presence in America,” and it “operates within, and is not in radical opposition to, society itself” (54). A liberal defender of high culture likewise suggests that the
leveling tendencies of American culture make it difficult to sustain high culture. He speculates about whether Tocqueville has “been confirmed in his belief that a meritocratic art cannot survive in a democratic society” and suggests that “the serious artist finds it harder and harder to resist the pressures of popular taste” (Brustein 1997d, 32).

Conservatives are nevertheless careful to insist that their support of traditional university curricula and their revulsion at the revisionists are neither elitist nor undemocratic. Kimball, for example, assails the “pernicious” idea that establishing a canon in humanistic studies is “undemocratic.” This “common” notion, he argues, incorrectly sees democracy as “inimical to authority, tradition, and rigor in its cultural institutions” (1990, 6). Indeed, suggests Bloom, the average student suffers from lack of familiarity with great literature. “As the awareness that we owed almost exclusively to literary genius falters, people become more alike, for want of knowing they can be otherwise. . . . Instead of being overwhelmed by Cyrus, Theseus, Moses or Romulus, [students] unconsciously act out the roles of the doctors, lawyers, businessmen or TV personalities around them” (1987, 64, 67).

Another conservative commentator asks if the classic texts of Western civilization were written by the elite for the elite. Of course they were, he maintains, but why does that matter? The origins of art and literature have little to do with their quality. And Karl Marx, after all, did not seek slave art or proletarian literature. Rather, he wanted the best of art and culture to be “part of the cultural birthright of the working classes” (Hook 1989, 31). Similarly, that most authors of the Western tradition are white males of high social class does not mean that their works are elitist or racist or sexist. Indeed, to believe that is itself racist, sexist, or elitist, “since it implies that the color of your skin decides the content of your thought” (Todorov 1989, 30).

The classic American ambivalence toward elites is strikingly manifest in the conservative literature, where conservatives accuse each other of pandering to the elites. Thus, many Americans, including corporate leaders and the Republican establishment, are seen as “chronic appeasers who know they are viewed with contempt by the cultural elite” (quoted in Scully 1993, 27). There’s “social-class anxiety” among conservatives that makes them unwilling to cite Scripture or speak of gay sex as a sin because this puts them in the “ranks of hillbillies” (Klinghoffer 1998, 24). Because “society’s leaders” are pro-choice, the status climbers feel a need to acquiesce to it: “acceptance of abortion is necessary for the approval of our bet-
ters" (Cunningham 1992, 44). In “elite circles,” supporting abortion rights is “de rigueur,” and politicians and the media therefore assume that since everyone they know favors abortion, everyone does (Editorial 1998a, 12). An “oppressive assumption” holds “that no one of any learning or sophistication could possibly be a religious believer,” and “social penalties” are “meted out to those who nonetheless are” (Krauthammer 1998, 92). Catholics who mute their abortion views to make themselves appear more socially respectable are “social climbers aspiring to be accepted by a Protestant establishment already in eclipse” (Neuhaus 1986, 46). As the Left takes over more of the culture, what develops is “a subtle paternalism that regards moral conservatives as intellectual and social infants who have to be educated out of their backward ways” (Wagner 1986, 52). Conservatives have been charged with philistinism for so long that “they have accepted the characterization invented for them by their enemies. Instead of realizing that the accusation of philistinism is merely a way of smearing their defense of traditional standards and values, they have assumed that the realm of mental culture was a liberal preserve” (Lipman 1991b, 53).

The status anxieties within the conservative camp may be exacerbated by evidence suggesting that the most distinguished faculty and the brightest students tend to show greater affinity for leftward causes. While liberals may dominate all college campuses, they are strongest at the most prestigious ones (Lipset 1996, 180, 183). Cultural conservatives tend to have degrees from less prestigious institutions than do cultural liberals, and the grassroots membership of progressive causes is more educated and likely to be upper middle class, while conservatives are dominated by members of the lower middle class (Hunter 1998, 9). Nevertheless, evidence shows that Evangelicals have become increasingly prominent within elite circles in the United States since the late 1970s, even though their numbers within the population have not greatly changed. This development belies the conventional wisdom that people become more secular as their wealth and status improve (Lindsay 2008, 68, 79).

One Christian critic of the way in which the culture wars have been waged suggests that conservatives have blundered in identifying “the enemy as the ‘cultural elite.’ What does that make conservatives? The ‘culti

ally impaired’? The ‘backward fundamentalists’?” All too often, he argues, Evangelicals are so much a part of the culture that they believe that the cultural elite is evil simply because they are part of a cultural elite rather than
because of their positions (Horton 1994, 31, 44). Yet this critique may be missing the intended irony in the use of the term cultural elite. According to Lakoff, conservatives subordinate culture to morality so that “the idea of a real cultural superiority that isn’t moral superiority makes no sense. . . . For this reason, the term ‘cultural elite’ can only be ironic, referring to a self-sustaining influential group with false claims to superiority” (2002, 240).

The Right aligns itself with elites insofar as it defends WASP culture but characterizes WASP culture as little more than the traditional American culture. WASP ideals—of industry and success, of conscience and civic-mindedness—have continued to dominate American society even as WASPS themselves have slipped to minority status because “being a WASP was a game anyone could play. Over the years, everyone has, including descendants of the people Lincoln freed” (Brookhiser 1993b, 79). Attachment to this elite is thus acceptable because it represents the democratic potential of American society. Or does it?

Conservatives have reached no consensus here. One commentator argues that despite cultural myths of universalism and of the United States as an immigrant nation, “in real life what was important was the assimilation to a WASP norm” (O’Sullivan 1994b, 36). But another conservative contends that “there is no Anglo copyright on the characteristics that make for assimilation and success in America: hard work, thrift, civic-mindedness, devotion to faith, family, and freedom. The successful third-generation Polish-American is not a WASP but a successful third-generation Polish-American” (Neuhaus 1995, 64). Yet a third conservative writer suggests that whatever the ethnicities and cultures of those at the lower levels of the social pyramid, the culture at the top remains Anglo-American (Hart 1996, 52, 56). An editorial in National Review argues that not just the top of the social hierarchy remains WASP-like but rather pretty much everything above the bottom. “The important social divisions in American life are those between the Knickerbocker Club, the Nashville Kiwanis, and Teamsters Local 137—but to a foreign eye they all look WASPish.” (1991a, 18). As seen by the Left, of course, the WASP nature of the hierarchy is offensive. That is, those at the top are always “indisputably American,” seemingly without culture or race. White ethnic groups and then nonwhite ethnic groups follow the elite. These “hierarchies of worth” are “perpetuated by dominant groups” (Chock 1995, 317).

If some conservatives align themselves with WASP elites, other com-
mentators are willing to align themselves with an elite by defending the cause of high art. The idea of “elitist” as meaning exclusionary rather than excellent is helping to kill the idea of high art in American society, one writer argues. He points out that “the charge of ‘elitism’ was hurled not only against the wealthy consumers of art but also against its often penniless creators. . . . You were elitist if you created works of art and you were elitist if you bought them. No wonder so few people were willing to come to the defense of elitism” (Brustein 1997d, 30). Another defender of the arts argues that if the NEA funds established institutions in the major cities, it is accused of “upper-class elitism,” but if it funds “a suburban orchestra in Ohio or a young, unfamous poet in Oregon, that’s subsidizing the second-rate.” Why does no one complain about funding the space program when few people care “what kind of rocks Mars has”? (Pollitt 1997, 10). And some liberals perceive the “realm of mental culture” as a “liberal preserve.” The Right began its attack on culture, the arts, and academe in the 1980s, at precisely the time when the Left had disappeared as a political force but not as a cultural one (Hughes 1992a, 46).

It is probably not accidental that the Right appears to defend the elite at the top of the class scale, while the Left primarily defends the elite in the arts. Yet in both cases, the argument suggests that elites are either holding out ideals to which all can aspire (as in the case of the gentleman or the WASP) or producing goods of direct benefit to the people. Thus, one liberal suggests that if one can find race, class, or gender bias in both Louis L’Amour and a classical Greek play, rejecting elitism might mean teaching the L’Amour. Doing so, however, would do violence to the ideal of democracy, which is to bring true education to the people (Howe 1991, 42). Hence, elitism and democracy are reconciled in the need to bring the best of the culture to the masses.

Both the Left and the Right are mindful of the pitfalls of “antielitism.” While “elitism” is in disfavor, all applaud “standards” and “quality.” All assert the need to make distinctions of literary or artistic merit. If antielitism means rejecting classic works of literature, no one is for it. Indeed, one commentator suggests that the survival of the NEA may be a kind of Pyrrhic victory, since the agency now avoids any discussion of what constitutes “excellence in the arts” and thus does not fulfill its mission (McCarter 1999, 17).

Writers on the left do not comment on experiences of being patronized
by a cultural elite, but they, too, distance themselves from such elites—often as defenders of popular culture and of what they call the democratization of culture. Thus, one writer notes that “social conservatives have been notably unsuccessful at stemming the democratization of culture, the breakdown of those class, sex, and race-bound conventions that once reliably separated high from low, ‘news’ from ‘gossip,’ public from unspeakably private, respectable from deviant” (Willis 1996, 22). But critics including Thomas Frank have pointed out that little of substance has been accomplished by those in the Academic Left who have celebrated the “democratization” of culture. During the 1990s, he argues, academic specialists who engage in cultural studies proclaimed “a populist celebration of the power and ‘agency’ of audiences and fans, . . . and of their talent for transforming just about any bit of cultural detritus into an implement of rebellion.” They studied these “lowbrow” samples of popular culture and “turned their attention from the narrow canon of ‘highbrow’ texts” as an “assault on the powers that be” (2001, 282–83). Yet their studies of resistance were not far from the “stuff of market populism.” Rather than being “daringly counterhegemonic,” their ideas seemed like an “apologia for existing economic arrangements” (295); “our newfound faith in active, intelligent audiences made criticism of the market philosophically untenable” (303). In a more conventional and old-fashioned vein, Robert Brustein bemoans the fact that “criticism is largely left to the mass media, which arbitrates . . . literary and cultural approval.” This situation differs substantially from the earlier time of little magazines and small publishers, of avant-garde theaters, adventurous galleries, and listener-supported radio—a time when respected critics helped to develop new tastes and identify new talent (1992, 37).

A progressive writer cites TV talk shows as a product of cultural democratization and suggests that they are “anathema to social conservatives, for whom the only legitimate function of popular culture is instructing the masses in the moral values of their betters.” Because it “would be a breach of American democratic etiquette” for critics to suggest that their cultural tastes are superior, they blame either money-hungry media corporations or “a perverse New York and Hollywood cultural elite” for such popular fare (Willis 1996, 19).

The Right is not alone, however, in deriding “Hollywood liberals.” Frank, for example, paints an ugly portrait of this genre as seen in the pages
of *People* magazine: “Here you read about movie stars who go to charity balls for causes like animal rights and the ‘underprivileged.’ . . . Minor TV personalities instruct the world to stop saying mean things about the overweight or the handicapped. . . . Here liberalism *is* a matter of shallow appearance, of fatuous self-righteousness; it *is* arrogant and condescending, a politics in which the beautiful and the wellborn tell the unwashed and the beaten-down and the funny-looking how they ought to behave, how they should stop being racist or homophobic” (2005, 240–41).

Division exists within the Left about the significance of television talk shows. Not all leftist commentators believe that these programs constitute a genuine expression of the people. Indeed, one observer suggests that such shows “take lives bent out of shape by poverty and hold them as entertaining exhibits. . . . This is class exploitation, pure and simple” (Ehrenreich 1995, 92). Another writer is concerned that these shows “intentionally or not, have become storm troopers for the right” because “they focus attention on the individual, aberrant behavior of a small number of citizens and declare them representative of a group.” In exploiting and solidifying stereotypes about young, mostly black and Latino poor people, such shows destroy “any sense of understanding, connectedness, collective responsibility and the potential for redemption” (Nelson 1995, 801). As if to prove this writer correct, *National Review* editorializes that TV talk shows “offer a window on the future of diversity-dominated America. [They] are the only national forum in which blacks, Hispanics, and trailer-park WASPS freely join together with the ground rules drawn from Diversity Theory. No thought or desire is ruled out as unacceptably perverse” (Editorial 1995b, 18).

There is derision on the left about the Right’s tendency to see “dangerous elites” in many places. Thus, liberal observers note that historians have been added to the list of such elites because of proposed national history curriculum standards. Historians have thus joined the “internal enemies,” along with media executives who promote rap and eggheads who watch PBS and support government funding for the arts (Foner 1995, 302).

Some commentators on the left engage in criticism of elitist tendencies within their camp. Critics complain, for example, about the “cultural nose-thumbing” that is “common in the writings of feminists and leftists who speak about things that concern everyone in language interesting and available to few but themselves” (Pochoda 1992, 344). And some observers
are concerned that the “cultural left” has given a bad name to leftist politics because of “its arcane ‘elitist’ battles over curriculum . . . and its aversion to the socially and sexually conservative values that most Americans uphold” (Willis 1998, 18).

**Elitism in the Feminist and Gay Rights Movements**

In the area of contemporary feminism, the Left offers a hint of the kind of status anxieties that conservatives discuss. One progressive feminist suggests that “the current attack on ‘victim feminism’ is partly a class phenomenon, a kind of status anxiety. It represents the wish of educated female professionals to distance themselves from stereotypes of women as passive, dependent, helpless and irrational” (Pollitt 1994a, 224). The helplessness and irrationality of those such as Lorena Bobbitt (who cut off her husband’s penis) must be punished, lest all women are tainted by her characteristics. The Bobbitt affair revealed a gap between feminist intellectuals and the average woman, since Bobbitt garnered “grass-roots female backing” despite women’s studies professors’ reluctance to support such militancy (Ehrenreich 1994, 74). “Maybe the troops are more militant than the generals” (Pollitt 1994a, 224).

The Left and the Right converge in a way on the issue of feminist elitism, as commentators from the right and center also criticize American feminism for its detachment from the concerns of “average” women. Thus, a writer in *Time* notes feminism’s “upper-middle-class intellectual elite” origins and suggests that feminism “remains suspect to those who have never ventured onto a college campus” (Bellafante 1998, 57). Those on the left are concerned about poor and minority women whose concerns are often ignored, suggesting that “what’s missing is a grassroots, militant, political movement” (Pollitt 1998c, 10).

For many commentators on the right, feminist leaders have failed to appreciate most women’s desire for marriage and families. These pundits argue that much of what has happened in the name of women’s liberation hurts “all but an elite minority of career-oriented childless women professionals” (Gallagher 1987, 39). And they do not view the supposed backlash against feminism during the 1980s as an attempt to sow doubts in women’s minds about feminist goals. Rather, they suggest that the media
might simply have been picking up on existing concerns and touching “a nerve that had been rubbed raw by a generation of out-of-touch feminist leaders” (Gibbs 1992, 51). Some liberals express irritation with those academic “consciousness-raisers” who are attempting to transform the curriculum to eliminate “androcentric” materials. The women’s studies crowd does not represent most American women, who subscribe to an older feminism that seeks equity, fair treatment, and an end to discrimination (Sommers 1992, 30).

The perception of a gap between leadership elites and members arises in connection with the movement for gay rights as well. More conservative gay commentators suggest that the gay leaders who align themselves with progressive causes and seek a “culture war” are clearly out of step with most gays, who want acceptance and assimilation into the larger population (Bawer 1994; Sullivan 1989). “Much of the gay leadership clings to notions of gay life as essentially outsider, anti-bourgeois, radical. Marriage, for them, is co-optation into straight society,” says a gay conservative. “But for many other gays—my guess, a majority . . . a need to rebel has quietly ceded to a desire to belong” (Sullivan 1989, 22). Other gay commentators note that ordinary gays and lesbians have pressed for the adoption of same-sex marriage, while their leaders have retained “a powerful antipathy to ‘heterosexist norms’” (Rotello 1996, 15). Some progressive gays suggest that the movement lacks a national activist group akin to those of the civil rights and women’s rights movements (Kopkind 1993, 600) and that the national leadership too often operates “on a top-down and elitist corporate model” (Ireland 1999, 11).

Conclusions

Though populism and antielitism have long been part of American culture and politics, the unleashing of the culture wars brought new attention to otherwise arcane aspects of elite culture—the curricula offered at elite universities, the grants awarded by the NEA. A hyperconsciousness of how ideas in the arts and the academy might influence the larger society appeared to make culture war antagonists feel obliged to attend to aspects of the culture that might heretofore have received little notice. Defenders of the traditional culture on the right now had to distinguish between the “true” or tra-
ditional culture and that which passes for it in contemporary arts and academia. On the left, struggles took place between the desire to applaud the “democratization of culture” and the desire to maintain standards.

An increased self-consciousness about the cultural dimensions of status might also have caused concern among economic and political elites who have generally maintained a distance from cultural matters. Heightened insecurities about one’s status in the social hierarchy might have led to attacks against cultural products that were unfamiliar or were perceived to be alien or challenging to their positions.