Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

Thomson, Irene Taviss

Published by University of Michigan Press

Thomson, Irene Taviss.
Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1666

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=317288
Unlike the other American cultural themes that occupy the culture warriors, moderation is seen as an uncomplicated good. The American admiration for it contains no ambivalences or ambiguities. In his 1979 study of American journalism, Herbert Gans suggested that “moderatism” or distaste for “excess or extremism” was among the “enduring values in the news” (51). Americans, he suggested, tend to question polar opposites and uphold moderate solutions. Both atheists and religious fanatics are frowned upon. Both conspicuous consumers and hippies who renounce consumer goods are condemned; “political ideologists are suspect, but so are completely unprincipled politicians.” Being immoderate is not good, “whether it involves excess or abstention” (52).

Moderation is basic to American middle-class morality: “Americans instinctively try to find the centrist position between extremes” (Wolfe 1998, 72). They support seeking the “middle ground” even on such highly contentious issues as abortion (Pew Research Center 2006b). More than one-fifth of Americans have a highly unfavorable opinion of both anti-abortion activists and strong advocates of abortion rights, seeing both as intolerant and extremist (Dillon 1996, 120). In national surveys of religious attitudes, the majority of Americans identify themselves as being in the middle; only
approximately a quarter of the population self-identifies as religious conservatives or liberals (Wuthnow 1996, 326). Seen in a cross-cultural perspective, “in America ‘middle’—as in Middletown, middle class, and Middle America—is not a matter of mediocrity but centrality. Far from a question of being average (as in the verbal associations of middling, middle-brow, and middle-income to the British), it has everything to do with being American” (Guinness 1993, 42). To be sure, the well-known American fondness for moderation has occasioned some famous rhetorical flourishes. Accepting the 1964 presidential nomination, Barry Goldwater announced, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice . . . and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” But Goldwater was resoundingly defeated in the ensuing election.

In the context of culture wars, moderation is often translated as “a plague on both your houses”—or indeed, on “all your houses.” Partisans in the culture wars attack their opponents by derisively treating them as “extremists.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the canon wars. One writer, for example, “agrees with all sides” in the debate about the academic canon. Conservatives are correct in seeing some books as more profound and more essential to our culture than others, even though dead white Western men wrote them. Liberals are correct in suggesting that the canon can be amended to include those—such as women and members of minority groups—who were previously excluded for the wrong reasons. Radicals who assume that one cannot have one reading list for all students are clearly wrong, however, since it is “foolish to argue that Chekhov has nothing to say to a black woman.” This commentator rejects the extreme views of both the radicals who would have all students read material reflecting their own subcultures and the “ultraradicals” who attack “the ‘privileging’ of ‘texts’ . . . and think one might as well spend one’s college years deconstructing Leave It to Beaver.” However, she ultimately sees the whole enterprise as foolish, a phenomenon that would not occur in a country of real readers. In such a country, the “top-ten list” would represent only a fraction of what people would read in a lifetime and would therefore be inconsequential. In our society, the debate over the canon rests on an image of culture as “medicinal.” Consuming the right kind of culture will produce healthy and desirable people. “The culture debaters turn out to share a secret suspicion of culture itself, as well as the anti-pornographer’s
belief that there is a simple, one-to-one correlation between books and behavior” (Pollitt 1991, 331).

Others who criticize the extremes on all sides likewise perceive culture as continually changing and being renegotiated. If American culture is always and necessarily a work in progress, says another critic, attempts by both the Right and the Left to fix it at any point do not make sense. There cannot be “only one path to virtuous American-ness” (Hughes 1992a, 45). In the current debates, there is no longer a Left and a Right, “just two puritan sects—one saying obscure Third World authors will replace Milton” and the other unable to “mount a satisfactory defense since it has burned most of its bridges to the culture at large.” Those who rail against multiculturalism and those who “sanctify grievance” are equally to blame. Accusations of “a new McCarthyism of the left” are absurd, since “no conservative academics have been fired by the lefty thought police” (46). Yet the “extremists” of political correctness are equally absurd in their view that only blacks can write about slavery and only the oppressed deserve credibility (48).

Multiculturalism itself is to be approved of in its moderate versions but not as presented by its extremist advocates. Thus, “if multiculturalism is about learning to see through borders, one can be all in favor of it,” but if it means “cultural separatism,” one cannot (Hughes 1992a, 47). Multiculturalist prodding has made American history “more inclusive, representative, and accurate.” But this change has failed to satisfy those multiculturalists who prefer “to describe the Western tradition as just one of many equally important contributors to the American identity” and thus “make hash of history” (P. Gray 1991, 16).

The very intensity of the debates about the canon or multicultural education also comes in for some criticism. One writer suggests that both sides should “lighten up.” Conservatives must “realize that criticisms of the great books approach to learning do not amount to totalitarianism. And the advocates of multiculturalism need to regain the sense of humor that enabled their predecessors . . . to coin the term P.C. years ago—not in arrogance but in self-mockery” (Ehrenreich 1991, 84).

Another moderating view takes the culture warriors to task for confusion or simplification. Conservatives are accused of conflating “the whole intellectual heritage of the West with . . . capitalism and representative
democracy,” even though any great books curriculum would include the “hierarchical totalitarianism of Plato” and the “leveling totalitarianism of Marx” as well as novelists and poets who do not sing the praises of capitalism (Stanford 1989, 18). The allegation on the left that the traditional curriculum reinforces the status quo is equally wrongheaded, since Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud hardly serve as “an inducement for voting Republican” (20).

Because moderation is so often equated with the good, claiming a position at the center is often seen as desirable. One conservative writer therefore rejects the right of liberals such as Robert Hughes or Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to appropriate the center for themselves. Terry Teachout argues that the center is getting crowded as liberals and “ageing leftists” now attack the “new left-wing cultural orthodoxy” that previously came in for criticism only from the right (1992, 53). This is progress of a sort, but the liberal centrists still cling to the idea that “there are two equally ominous threats to high culture, one from the Left and one from the Right.” In truth, few conservative politicians take any interest in culture. “There certainly are right-wing zealots afoot, but they are mainly interested in such things as abortion, free condoms, and prayer in the schools, not deconstruction, phallocentrism, and clitoral hermeneutics” (54).

But while all are hostile or derisive toward those they consider extremists, the existence of a “center” is often questioned. Thus, Hughes, one of the liberals Teachout cites as attempting to monopolize the center, argues that there really is no such thing as a center. Conservatives such as Jesse Helms, Hughes maintains, believe that the National Endowment for the Arts must not stray “from what he fancies to be the center line of American ethical belief. The truth is, of course, that no such line exists—not in a society as vast, various and eclectic as the real America” (1989, 82). In similar fashion, a progressive contends that government funding for the arts cannot rely on “community standards” because this “rests on the idea of a homogeneous community, with clearly demarcated standards, which does not in fact exist” (Mattick 1990, 357). And while Teachout mocks liberals for their eagerness to place themselves in the desirable center, he, too, suggests that the center does not exist. There is only good and bad, right and wrong. Liberals’ center-seeking pattern persists because the “idea of choosing sides in the culture war makes them intensely uncomfortable” (1992, 54). Many
other culture warriors undoubtedly would agree with Teachout that there is right and wrong and that they are in the right.

One of the major books in the canon wars dispute, Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* (1990), closes by suggesting that the center has collapsed. “What we have witnessed is nothing less than the occupation of the center by a new academic establishment, the establishment of tenured radicals” (189). In response, Russell Jacoby suggests that conservatives have written the major books in the canon wars because the “leftist academics” are “secure employees of mainstream institutions.” Because they are insiders, not outsiders, they “attack hegemony and conservatism from within hegemonic and conservative institutions” (1994, 162).

In fact, a 2006 national survey of political opinion among faculty members suggests that academics have become more centrist, at the expense largely of the conservatives, though there are also fewer liberals today than there were in 1969. Indeed, more faculty now describe themselves as “moderate” (47 percent) than as either liberal (44 percent) or conservative (9 percent), and the youngest cohort (those between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five) contains the highest proportion of moderates and the lowest proportion of liberals (Gross and Simmons 2007; see also Zipp and Fenwick 2006).

Centrism or moderation is also an appealing position with respect to the issue of support for the arts. In the campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts, two forms of extremism are seen: the “self-appointed political guardians of American virtue” and those “who think any denial of a grant to ‘experimental’ art is cultural fascism.” Most Americans lie between these extremes, supporting government funding for the arts with little government control (Hughes 1992b, 43). Put slightly differently, it is not a violation of the First Amendment to criticize the National Endowment for the Arts (as some on the left would have it), nor should art be tame, old, and heterosexual (as some on the right would have it) (Editorial 1990a, 7). As to the art itself, “for every neoconservative highbrow who denies that art can exist in the schlock-swollen flood of popular culture, there is a postmodernist leveler who insists that every morsel of schlock is art” (Bayles 1994, 65).

One spokesman for the arts sees them as being attacked from the left, the right, and the center. The politicization of the National Endowment for
the Arts, Brustein argues, has brought the “assumption that any resources derived from the taxpayer’s pocketbook should be distributed according to the taxpayer’s preferences” rather than using expert judgment. So art is now attacked by “the politically correct left,” “the right-wing minions of moral correctness,” and “the middlebrow arbiters of culture . . . who bark at anything not immediately familiar to the middle-class public.” Each side claims “endorsement from the majority.” For the Right, this majority usually means “the clean-cut Americans who celebrate Thanksgiving in Norman Rockwell paintings.” For the Left, it means “all those previously excluded from the cultural banquet”—in other words, multiculturalism and cultural diversity. For the center, it means effectively the marketplace’s “bottom line” (1997d, 31–32).

The issues of family values and feminism also elicit writing of the “plague on all your houses” variety. A progressive feminist writer chooses to mock all sides. It is so easy, she says, to support “family values” and to find the culprits who are undermining it. “The right blames a left-wing cultural conspiracy: obscene rock lyrics, sex education, abortion, prayerless schools, working mothers, promiscuity, homosexuality, decline of respect for authority and hard work, welfare and, of course, feminism. . . . The left blames the ideology of postindustrial capitalism: consumerism, individualism, selfishness, alienation, lack of social supports for parents and children, atrophied communities, welfare and feminism. The center agonizes over teen sex, welfare moms, crime and divorce, unsure what the causes are beyond some sort of moral failure—probably related to feminism” (Pollitt 1992a, 88, 90). Though this is clearly a defense of the ever-beleaguered feminists, it is also a mockery of the rhetoric of family values.

Another commentator, not wedded to feminism, mocks both the feminists and the traditionalists who oppose them, assailing both “victim feminism” and “victim antifeminism.” Conservatives who see women as miserable because of the changes wrought by feminism manifest a “pessimistic view” that “probably bears about the same relation to reality as the feminist view that discrimination and bias against women are running rampant in America.” Both sides view the problems of contemporary women as social problems, so that feminists see stay-at-home mothers as victims of patriarchal oppression, while conservatives see working mothers as victims of feminist cultural coercion. The ideologies of both sides are “irrelevant to the lives of the majority of men and women who are interested neither in gen-
der warfare nor in going back to a mythical idyllic past but are trying to find their own balance between the modern and the traditional” (Cathy Young 1999, 20–21). Once again, only the sensible moderates see things clearly.

Moderation may take the form of simply heaping epithets on both sides, as when Krauthammer proposes respect for civil religion while deriding “Bible thumpers” and “zealous relic-hunting secularists” (1984, 16). The idea of moderation may suggest that a particular population does not look like the descriptions given to it by the extremists. Thus, a gay writer suggests that neither the queers who spout liberation from convention nor the conservatives who advocate adherence to convention represent the gay population. Most gays combine “sex and taxes, passion and furniture,” and “lesbian and gay differences are more various—and more public—than either Helms can hope to contain or than any few lesbian, gay or queer commentators can claim publicly to represent” (Abraham 1997, 6).

Another expression of moderation lies in finding the common ground between what appear to be extremes. Thus, one liberal writer suggests that the current culture war is not really about the “final battle between good and evil.” Both sides share the goal of worldly success but reject the “purely individual strategy of salvation” of the how-to-get-rich gurus. Both seek “social rather than purely individual solutions to the achievement of the good life.” But both operate within the confines of modern capitalism and can therefore steer things only a bit to the right or the left (Judis 1999, 56).

In a rather different vein, a critic of both creationism and the “multicultural left” notes that both worldviews aim to indoctrinate children rather than encouraging them to make up their own minds. The creationists who say that evolution and creationism should receive equal time in schools are succumbing to the “relativistic trope” of multiculturalism despite their horror at the multiculturalists’ insistence that “there is no single Truth.” But a similar contradiction plagues the multiculturalists, who welcome the perspectives of gays, women, and racial minorities but not those of fundamentalist Christians (Zimmerman 1999, 13–14).

Even in such a seemingly irreconcilable argument as that between evolution and creationism, the sounds of moderation can be heard as both the creationists and those who use Darwinist explanations of all behavior are taken to task for similar failings. “In their insistence that the meaning of human life stands or falls on the truth or falsehood of evolution, the creationists resemble certain Darwinians who derive ethics from paleontology
and biology, and have scientific explanations for the entirety of emotional and cultural life, and conflate the truths of evolution with a materialist view of human existence. . . . The explanations of the determinist Darwinians are not scientific, they are scientific; and scientism, too, is only a faith” (Editorial 1999, 12). Similarly, a writer suggests that the current arguments are akin to a battle “between two 19th century fundamentalisms, one religious, the other scientific” (Glynn 1999, 44).

There is also a kind of centrum in such statements as, “In culture this year, as in politics, the extremes are touching. The tribunes of the people have joined forces with the conglomerated princes of capitalist darkness to defend the right of Ice-T and Body Count to arouse their listeners with fantasies of cop-killing” (Editorial 1992, 7). Being derisive about both sides—the “extremes”—is another typical manifestation of moderation. On the abortion issue, for example, numerous commentators see bad behavior or hypocrisy on both sides. “For a decade and a half, the abortion issue has made extremists and hypocrites of us all—pro-choicers enshrining trimesters in the Constitution, pro-lifers using an ostensible concern for the mothers’ health to restrict the mother’s freedom of choice” (Kinsley 1989, 96).

Finally, a kind of moderation is expressed in the repeated suggestion that culture warriors offer extremist proclamations for fund-raising purposes. A liberal notes that while the actual dollar amounts of government funding for the arts are trivial, conservatives use the issue in their direct-mail fund-raising as a “hot-button” issue (Kinsley 1992a, 6). And a conservative says that conservatives have failed to acknowledge all the ways in which they have been winning the culture wars—with divorce, illegitimacy, teen sexual activity, abortion, crime, and suicide rates all falling—because to do so would not be good for fund-raising; the apocalyptic style sells (Nadler 1998, 30).

If moderation has been something of a constant in American culture, is anything new about its current manifestations? To the degree that elites are now more polarized than was previously the case, moderation is unusual because it represents antipolarization among the polarized. The political pressures toward centrum present difficult choices for those whose views represent polar extremes in a culture war. In addition, the new awareness of subcultural variations in the population makes it more difficult to find the “center.”