

Return to Culture Wars and the Politics of Culture

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The last century ended in a decade of relative prosperity, a generally strong economy, and the ability of the working classes (indeed most people) to mask the fact that real wages had remained more or less stagnant for almost 30 years through access to seemingly unlimited credit sustaining ever growing levels of consumption. Consumption is important in a capitalist economy because, to put it in perhaps simple terms, capitalists cannot realize profits from the production process without the sale of goods and services. Or so we all imagined. The latter half of the 20th Century also brought us the ascendance of finance over other forms of capital as cost accounting, stock values and bottom lines replaced long term investments in R&D and corporate strategic planning. By the time this new century was well on its way we discovered that credit had its limits, finance could do little but sustain the profits of financial institutions, and over the more recent period a realization that the increase in labor productivity now sustains profits for sectors like manufacturing even as workforces are cut drastically and unemployment has reached levels unprecedented since the end of the depression of the 1930s.

The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 marked the first time a Democrat held the White House (with the brief one-term presidency of Jimmy Carter elected in 1976) since the Vietnam War era beginning with Richard Nixon elected in 1968. Throughout this period the Democratic Party controlled the House of Representatives and in 1994 Republicans under the leadership of Newt Gingrich presented the public with a Contract With America, a document that laid out a set of Conservative principles and was a clarion call for the all out culture war that was waged up to that point as a guerilla war. The “infamous” 60s came to represent unfettered personal freedom (one might assume in retrospect the main freedom that was threatening to Conservatives was the sexual revolution) and a liberal agenda of Civil Rights, Student Rights, Worker Rights, Gay Rights, Women’s Rights and many other manifestations of personal and social change in this country. With the issuance of this so-called contract Conservatives looked to channel the “silent majority” of Americans whose way of life was threatened by waves of challenges to a status quo of compliance and control. One’s position on abortion became a litmus test for the Right, and with it came all manner of initiatives designed to hold the line or even reverse many of the changes wrought in the preceding two decades.

We might argue that these earlier Culture Wars reached its peak during the 2000 national election when hysteria over gay rights (in this case the rights of gays to marry) mobilized a conservative religious base to come out and vote for George W. Bush to defeat the Clinton years and the

candidacy of Al Gore. We might also say with the exception of a core segment of our society focused on gun rights and against women's rights that culture wars had receded from national politics after that election. Large government surpluses, apparent prosperity and a seemingly endless boom in real estate prices fueled a period of exuberance that had little room for concerns about how individuals lived their lives.

All of this changed with the economic crisis which exploded on the scene in 2008. Financial capital was in a tailspin, accumulated paper wealth disappeared and with it the value of many working family's pensions and investments; homes—the single most important store of value for most middle class families—were now worth less than the loans written against them, and the result is that according to Census Bureau estimates poverty rates in the US are at levels unheard of since the start of the War on Poverty. We responded to the knowledge that so many people in this country lived in abject poverty by launching a wide-ranging (though in the end unsuccessful) series of government programs to abate the worst aspects of that poverty and provide mechanisms, it was believed, to allow people to climb out of poverty. An expanding array of government programs fell into lock step with our ever growing defense establishment, all in the service of rationalizing and saving our capitalist system. This time is different, this time the government is viewed as the problem. And it is increasingly being portrayed by the commentators and rabble rousers on the Right as a product of an immoral and corrupt culture that has taken hold of our society. We are reminded of Marx's vivid description in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx, 1995) of citizens rushing to defend the rights of property only to return to their homes to find their rents increased. In much in the same way, this populist assault against a permissive culture coupled with a rhetoric of ending government programs and protections will result in an increasingly destitute existence when massive concessions to the wealthy will be paid for by cutting the meager social safety net even more (targeting Medicare and Social Security).

With the economic collapse and rising poverty rates has come a renewed Culture War. People are angry at recent events, but fail to address their anger where it belongs. The populist rhetoric rails against big banks and obscene salaries, yet the populist anger and agitation is being redirected against government and social programs. This election season (and once again there is the irony that these words are written well before the election, but will appear well after!) is filled with candidates who champion the rights of the unborn in seeking to end legal abortion, who desire to put an end once and for all to any notion of same-sex marriage, who look to criminalize undocumented immigrants to the point of denying constitutional rights of citizenship to children born in this country, and who can't wait to end all manner of entitlement programs that provide torn safety nets like unemployment insurance, Medicare and Medicaid, and Social Security pensions. In short, government is the enemy and popular anger is directed at the only institution that, given our system of production, plays any role in muting the ravages of capitalism.

Four years of the Great Recession have perhaps begun to dislodge an old specter buried within the collective unconscious of critical sociologists: the thesis that capitalist crises necessarily produce powerful anti-capitalist social movements. Of course, few of us openly or perhaps even consciously express this idea. But a careful reader of those economic analyses of the current crisis, produced by the Left in early 2008 and 2009, might find optimism among some radical observers, a sense that this economic crisis might finally uncover, for all eyes to see, the systemic exploitation inherent in capitalism. And, no doubt, for some Americans the economic crisis did just that. They began to think about capitalism critically, questioning the stale religious dogma of neoclassical orthodoxy. But other Americans found different causes for our economic woes: immigration, terrorism, high taxes, and an overreaching federal government. At the moment, a struggle is underway between these viewpoints. This is a political struggle, an epistemological struggle, and a cultural struggle.

In his commentary on the 2010 general strike in France (French speakers may enjoy viewing <http://videos.wityspark.com/id/1219139211>), the Marxian economist Rick Wolff (2010) makes what might be called a “Weberian” argument when he writes that the current “capitalist crisis by itself need not produce organized mass mobilization against austerity.” Noting the fact that a remarkable 70% of the French public supported the September 7, 2010 general strike against the Sarkokozy government, Wolff attributes this support to “decades of ongoing anti-capitalist agitation... in the daily newspapers, inside trade unions, by explicitly anti-capitalist political parties, from intellectuals articulating critiques of capitalism and proposals for post-capitalist social change, etc.” To this culture of critical discourse, Wolff compares the U.S., where the “failure to develop, support, and widely disseminate anti-capitalist criticism and proposals for non-capitalist alternatives” informs a very different cultural and political response to the Great Recession. When we say that Wolff is making a Weberian argument, we are thinking of Weber’s analysis of the difference between “class” as a structural category and “class” as a political community or culture. Weber (2009) writes: “a class does not in itself constitute a community. To treat ‘class’ conceptually as having the same value as ‘community’ leads to distortion.... Yet, if classes as such are not communities, nevertheless class situations emerge only on the basis of communalization.” For Weber, social class produces systematically structured “life chances.”

But Weber goes further. These “life chances” can become the basis for political action, but for that to happen the class must become a community, a class community. For Weber, “The degree in which ‘communal action’... emerges from the ‘mass actions’ of the members of a class is linked to general cultural conditions, especially those of an intellectual sort. It is also linked to the... transparency of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the ‘class situation.’” To return to Wolff’s example, in France, a communal or cultural discourse critical of capitalism helps enable political struggle by establishing a certain connection between “the causes” and the “consequences” of the capitalist crises. And more recently mass demonstrations have erupted across Europe as different societies refuse to accept the rhetoric of austerity, refuse to see the problem of too much social support, of too many social guarantees, ready to point the finger at the greed of capitalism and the failure of governments to protect their citizens against the demands and requirements of capitalism (thanks to Rick Wolff for directing us to the photo essay in the *Sacramento Bee*, <http://blogs.sacbee.com/photos/2010/09/anti-austerity-protests-sweep.html>, providing images of many demonstrations throughout Europe in September 2010). Even in the face of the continuing onslaught of their own culture wars, as issues like wearing scarves and other religious symbols seem to preoccupy political discussions and debate, European working people know which priorities matter. It is possible to reject the culture argument, that society has its priorities in the wrong place and must face reality. In its place millions are protesting that there is no reality if it means requiring public austerity to protect private profits.

All of this brings us to a new task we have set for ourselves here at *Critical Sociology*. Like Max Weber, we see the study of cultural formations as central to the understanding of capitalism and contemporary society more generally. This is especially true for engaged, public sociologists whose work aims not only at social understanding, but social transformation for the better. Social transformation is, after all, in part a cultural process (the pages of this journal took up the question of the relationship of power and culture in a special issue, see Pfohl, 2004 and the articles that follow). As the new Culture and Media Editor, Graham Cassano seeks submissions that attempt to understand cultural phenomenon from a critical perspective, as well as submissions that directly engage in cultural and political struggle. Essays and articles that examine contemporary cinema, art, photography and literature, as well as reviews of art exhibitions, films, operas, concerts will all be considered for publication. In addition, we will be seeking poems, photos, and other works to publish in our pages. This new section of the journal will, we hope, contribute to our dual mission

as an outlet for scientific analysis and as a journal devoted to an engaged and necessarily political sociology.

Culture is prominent in the articles of this issue. First, Arthur Scarritt offers us an analysis of race and culture among the indigenous peoples of the Andes, pointing out how important culture and its interpretation are to facilitating their exploitation. It is the racialized social structures that reproduce the very mechanisms of subjugation. Culture plays a central role, among other factors, in what John Michael Roberts and Colin Cremin believe characterize a post-modern left liberalism personified by Hardt and Negri's work. They offer a broad criticism of this tendency, with the goal of developing a true alternative politics. And Abu Bakkar Bah uses the civil war in Sierra Leone to bring an African political experience into the discussion of sociological theory. Through an analysis of power relations within this African context Bah identifies three manifestations which can help us understand and theorize state decay leading to civil war. The issue closes with three commentaries on Loic Wacquant's *Punishing the Poor* (by James Whitman, Tracy Fisher and Ellen Reese, and Mona Lynch). Part of the argument in Wacquant's analysis hinges on why the economic and political culture in France and the US differ, with the result that American style punishment systems will not readily lend themselves to France. The commentators take on, among other things, the fact that Wacquant seems to leave out critical race theory and intersectional feminist analyses in his work.

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