

## CURRENT BOOKS

# The Comic Face of the Culture War

**BEFORE THE SHOOTING BEGINS:** Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War. By James Davison Hunter. Free Press. 320 pp. \$22.95

James Davison Hunter is one of the few American writers who try to understand the culture wars rather than fight them. His previous book, appropriately titled *Culture Wars*, showed that new fault lines had emerged in U.S. society setting citizen against citizen over questions of identity, sexuality, and private behavior. No longer are cultural and moral disagreements fought out primarily among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Instead, traditionalists of all three religions have joined forces against modernists of all three faiths (as well as those outside all faith traditions). What was once a theological conflict is now cosmological—and in many ways far more serious.

Hunter's book stood out among similar

works for two reasons. First, unusual for a sociologist, Hunter let real people speak their views. Second, listening to what he heard, he refused to condemn conservatives as backward bigots. Hunter claimed that there was enough moral complexity and ambiguity involved in the culture war to make it, not a contest between good and bad, but an even more tragic conflict between two versions of the good.

Convinced that we must find a way to have a more civilized national dialogue over our cultural differences, Hunter has now shifted his attention to the question of whether democracy can accommodate both sides in the culture war. In *Before the Shooting Begins*, he focuses on abortion, which, he argues, "mirrors the culture war as a whole." As the March 1993 murder of Dr. David Gunn outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida, demonstrates, the shooting has already begun. Ameri-

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Taking the life of an unborn child is murder.

Let Us Put An **END** To **ABORTION!**

Let's Save the Pre-embryos

Who wants to make health care worse for women?

Anti-choice politicians.

Don't let them use the promise of access to their most precious resource—women's health. There have been reports that some anti-choice politicians are trying to force states to cut funding for abortion services in their states' health budgets. Health care officials are encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity to improve women's health. If your abortion has been necessary to avoid a serious health problem, or if you are having trouble getting your health care, please contact your doctor.

Taking abortion out of the plan won't reduce the need for abortion, and it will make it even harder for women to find a safe, legal abortion. It will further reduce the number of doctors willing to provide abortion services. And it will force women to travel farther from home and delay the procedure, putting their health and lives at risk.

Americans will not accept a plan that discriminates against women and makes every woman's life more difficult.

We can force the hand of anti-choice politicians and make our state do the right thing. Or we can seize this opportunity to improve women's health, make abortion less necessary, and protect a woman's right to choose.

Don't turn back the clock on women's health.

Provisional Republican Chair, NARAL

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cans, bored with free trade and information highways, feel strong enough about abortion to kill. Yet despite the passion abortion evokes, it seems that Americans—and Hunter himself—are unsure what they are fighting about.

At one level abortion is a matter of “high” politics, involving fundamental questions about the definition of public and private, liberty and authority, and the meaning and purpose of life. Even a liberal such as Ronald Dworkin thinks that the religion clause of the First Amendment is the appropriate constitutional vehicle for deciding what our national approach to abortion should be. At this principled elevation, abortion presents a tragic conflict, like the Civil War. Each side in the debate understands itself, and is understood by its antagonists, as standing for a worldview that cannot be compromised.

All this is understandable. The issues involved in abortion—whether defined as matters of faith or matters of personal identity and privacy—are among the most serious we face. At another level, however, abortion—like other cultural issues such as homosexuality, sexual harassment, unwed motherhood, and childhood sexual abuse—cannot be discussed apart from sex. Americans tend to treat everything having to do with sex as the stuff of gossip, talk shows, soap opera, and confessional literature, even though intimate matters are fully as important in most lives as matters of state. People, after all, are just as much in need of pleasure as they are of principle. But pleasure and principle speak in different languages. The former involves not the body politic but the politics of the body. One arena makes public issues interesting to private individuals, while the other renders the lives of private individuals the subject of public scrutiny. A life, it was said in defense of Lorena Bobbitt, is worth more than a penis.

**B**ut in America a penis attracts more media attention than nuclear proliferation. Americans cannot get enough of the lurid. Sometimes conducted in the noble and tragic rhetoric of Antigone, discussions of

abortion can quickly take on the tone of the comic sexual wars of Aristophanes. But the comedy bears thoughtful consideration. For the debate over abortion is, at least in part, a debate over the remarkable transformation that has taken place since the 1950s in the way Americans think and act about what they do in bed, both inside and outside marriage.

**B**ecause he treats abortion only in elevated and principled terms, Hunter believes that our national discussion of this issue has become “a language game that has the form of meaningful communication, but is in fact merely another form of aggression.” We talk past each other when we discuss abortion. And the problem begins with intellectuals, who routinely violate fundamental democratic principles in the way they balance the competing interests at stake. Both a liberal such as Laurence Tribe of the Harvard Law School and a conservative such as R. C. Sproul, an evangelical theologian, are incapable of recognizing the legitimacy of their opponent’s position, Hunter argues. Tribe is explicitly anti-democratic. To him, the whole purpose of a constitution and a supreme court is to act as a check on popular positions. Sproul, by contrast, sees government as having no other purpose than to embody God’s will—not exactly a formula for pluralism or religious liberty.

Also bearing responsibility are interest groups on both sides of the controversy, groups that tend to prefer rhetorical overkill to persuasion. They manipulate images, whether of dead fetuses or bloody coat hangers. They haul out poignant examples of abortions gone wrong or morning-after regrets. Statistics are routinely colored to support one side or the other. Soundbites and direct mail substitute for informed debate. What the protagonists do not say is that they often have an interest in the outcome, sometimes in the form of money (abortion, after all, is a business), at other times in the form of an ideological agenda, and on still other occasions in the form of preserving gender privilege. (Hunter, like

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Catharine MacKinnon, points out that many men tend to favor access to abortion because it enhances their freedom to act irresponsibly.)

The third problem, as Hunter sees it, is that the general public is both uninformed and ambivalent. Forty-three percent of the American people have no idea what the holding in *Roe v. Wade* actually said, while 80 percent of Americans were willing to admit that they did not know much about recent landmark cases such as *Webster v. Reproductive Services*. Nonetheless, there is a relatively clear distribution of opinion on abortion: Clumps on either end are explicitly pro-choice or pro-life, while most people in the middle respond in different ways depending on what questions are asked.

After a very careful reading of the best polling data available, Hunter concludes that the position taken by most Americans on abortion reflects an emotional, rather than a rational, commitment. In the absence of strong moral traditions or a deep knowledge of the law, "all we can do is express our mutually opposed sense of 'revulsion' to one another. . . . People cannot help but respond viscerally to the images and rhetoric of the issue."

Finally, Hunter concludes, the institutions of civil society—intermediary institutions between the individual and state—have failed to mediate. The news media, which are supposed to be neutral, tend to report the struggle over abortion from the pro-choice side. Even more egregiously, professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association, chime in, confusing their expertise with their politics. (In one case described by Hunter, a number of distinguished historians submitted a brief in *Roe v. Wade* to the effect that abortion was not illegal throughout much of American history and that only in recent times did abortion become a moral issue, an act of shading the truth that the more scholarly of them subsequently came to regret.) Similarly, church leaders conflate their political commitments with religious ideas. One simply does not find intermediary associations playing the role assigned to them by Tocqueville;

they become parties to the debate, not vehicles for bringing the debate under control.

Seen from the perspective of high politics, Hunter is correct to stress that our national debate over abortion fails to reach Sophoclean levels. But suppose we look at the abortion controversy from the aspect of pleasure as well as of principle. In its Aristophanean form, abortion is about one question: Should people be allowed to sleep around knowing that, if birth control fails, they have a fallback option to prevent long-term pain from interfering with short-term pleasure? I believe that a rough consensus surrounding an answer exists in this country. Most people do not believe, in the abstract, that sex should be free of guilt, but they do believe, in the case of their own sexual activity, that abortion should be retained as an option—just in case their principles do not live up to the practical circumstances in which they find themselves.

From this perspective, the very things that Hunter finds problematic about high politics serve the politics of everyday life. Yes, interest groups on both sides of the issue manipulate the truth; they would not be faithful to the ideologically committed who support them with contributions and time if they did anything else. But the question is not whether both sides play fair; the more important question is whether they influence ordinary people. Generally speaking, their influence is rather minimal. Despite the determined opposition of the Catholic Church to abortion, many Catholics have abortions. Despite a 30-year effort to make abortion available on demand, most state legislators, clearly responding to majority sentiment, make abortion difficult to obtain in some circumstances while making it available in others.

Much the same ambivalence holds for public knowledge on the abortion question. To be sure, most people know less about the details of the issue than intellectuals, but they are surprisingly well informed when such knowledge is compared with how much they know about minority set-asides or agricultural price supports, perhaps because sex is one of the few

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genuine universals in our otherwise increasingly particularized society. And the fact that people respond emotionally to the issue ought not to cause dismay, given that sex is the most emotional activity in which people generally engage. Some Americans think we should have less sex and others think we should have more, representing the two ends of the bell-shaped curve that Hunter has found. The question for most people, however, is not whether sex should be prohibited on the one hand or treated casually on the other. Rather, they want to decide whether to have sex at a certain time with a certain person. Ambivalence on abortion may enable them to keep their options open.

**E**ven if we do believe that the question of sexuality should be given a principled rather than a contextual answer, the principled answer that has emerged in this country is not a bad one. Americans are willing to allow their beliefs on sexuality to be expressed as part of their larger understandings of modernity. Those who want women to work and children to free themselves from parental control—decisions that usually imply a more active sex life—support greater access to abortion. Those who believe in the traditional family and have a strong sense of religious morality want to see access to abortion restricted or eliminated. On what better basis can people disagree? There is a great deal to be said for a kind of moral pluralism that enables people to live in more modern or more traditional communities based upon their fundamental values. In such a pluralism, which Hunter endorses, compromise positions may be discovered. (Hunter offers the example of St. Louis, where the director of Reproductive Health Services and the city's leading pro-life attorney fashioned common ground on the need both to reduce unwanted pregnancies and to increase prenatal care.)

As for intellectuals and professional associations—well, here, Hunter has it just right. Of all the Americans he discusses, the intellectuals are the ones who ought to aim for ratio-

nality, nuance, and respect. They, and not the interest groups, have an obligation to make sure that the national debate on abortion is conducted fairly. I am fully persuaded by Hunter's account of how some intellectuals routinely call for balance in the discussion of abortion, only to wind up arguing for one particular side. And his treatment of the way professionals confuse their political sympathies with their professional obligations is chilling; psychologists, lawyers, sociologists, historians, and medical doctors should not be in the business of claiming, based on their expertise, that only one side in the abortion debate has a position that corresponds with mental health, the Constitution, public order, history, or life itself.

In short, if one approaches abortion from the standpoint of principle, the conflict is serious indeed. But if one approaches it from the standpoint of everyday common sense, we may not be facing a new Bosnia. I think it far too premature to conclude that our present democratic practices have failed us. *Roe v. Wade* was not accepted by most Americans. It was altered by democratic debate without even the suggestion of men on horseback, and the resulting compromise remains far from a total ban on abortion. The fact is that most Americans have both moral and religious convictions *and* a healthy respect for everyday pleasures. They therefore want their political system to issue elevated judgments on abortion but not to allow such judgments to interfere with their own freedom.

**D**emocracy, in short, has produced a response to the abortion conflict that is hypocritical, insincere, and contradictory. This naturally upsets those who believe in high politics. Hunter, dismayed by the superficiality of the debate, would prefer a "thicker" democracy that would enable sincere people to express what they really feel about abortion. His belief in "substantive democracy," which implies "an enlarged and deepened debate—a debate that is pre-political in nature" is surely welcome, but it is not

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the last word. More significant is his recognition that we need to be more modest about what politics can accomplish. It would do wonders for our political life if people looked to government to protect commerce, provide economic security, and defend the country, while religious, educational, and community institutions worried about the search for the good.

In any case, if we are to respect both the pleasure and the fear that sexuality evokes in

real people, we ought to recognize the dangers of sincerity and the benefits of hypocrisy. When most people believe that abortion is wrong but also know that they or their children may have to think about one, what can the political system do but look both ways?

—Alan Wolfe is University Professor and professor of sociology and political science at Boston University.

## Tattered Velvet

**EXIT INTO HISTORY:** A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe. *By Eva Hoffman.* Viking. 410 pp. \$23

**THE BIRTH OF FREEDOM:** Shaping Lives and Societies in the New Eastern Europe. *By Andrew Nagorski.* Simon & Schuster. 319 pp. \$23

**THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN:** The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. *By Gale Stokes.* Oxford Univ. Press. 319 pp. \$25

Once upon a time, and not a long time ago it was, Eastern Europe was an almost forgotten place, a great gray swath of territory in the external empire of the Soviet Union. Periodic explosions of discontent were followed by no less periodic repressions and freezes. Then, during the miraculous year 1989, it became a magical territory where hope was rediscovered and the impossible became real. Communism was dismantled, and the nations of Eastern and Central Europe entered a new era. To many in the region and in the West, it appeared as though a new genre of politics was being tested, one based on the values

of dialogue, subjectivity, and human autonomy. "Civil society" was the code word for this antipolitical politics, and Václav Havel, with his celebration of individual rights, its chief spokesperson.

Then, as a few wise prophets had predicted, the past came back with a vengeance. Nationalist passions threatened to destroy the fragile new political democracies, velvet revolutions were followed by velvet divorces, and the region appeared in less rosy colors. Transition ailments, including skyrocketing unemployment and social inequalities, soon led to

