

A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars, by Andrew Hartman

Tom Palaima on an examination of the conflicts that have been raging since the 1960s

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A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars

By Andrew Hartman

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I am not sure my country has the soul that historian Andrew Hartman gives it metaphorically in his title. Nor am I sure there is a God lending support to the factions in the

culture wars that claim to practise and promote what they call *his* political, moral and ethical values. But if both exist, Hartman's take on how, since the 1960s, different groups of Americans have fought to define and control our way of life convinces me that we should pray for mercy on our souls.

After reading Hartman's account of where we are now as a nation after more than 50 years of trying to improve how we relate to one another with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, education, material livelihood, personal beliefs and freedoms and forms of creative expression, I understand better why Kurt Vonnegut concluded his lifelong look at how Americans behave towards other Americans and other cultures by feeling like a man without a country.

Five decades of culture wars have undeniably transformed American life. Some Americans no longer live in what C. Wright Mills described in 1951 as a bureaucratic "iron cage". Some have a modicum of freedom to seek what Students for a Democratic Society activist Tom Hayden, in the Port Huron Statement of 1962, called "meaning in life that is personally authentic". The culture wars probably did help "tilt the arc of the moral universe toward justice" in society as a whole, as Hartman argues. But the long struggles against "the nation's cultural gatekeepers" who "were protecting racist, sexist, homophobic and conservative religious norms" did not bring us to Martin Luther King's, Betty Friedan's, Allen Ginsberg's or George McGovern's promised land, nor yet Lyndon Baines Johnson's. Economic, political, social and educational equality is still neither a fact nor a result.

This is no surprise. People who have power fight hard to keep power. Since the 1980s of Ronald Reagan, conservative forces in the US have relentlessly promoted the ideology of the goodness of capitalism and the badness of government at all levels, thereby subverting or reversing the gains achieved for workers, women, people of colour, LGBTQ Americans, immigrants and the underclass. And they have seized control of culture, following conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan's dictum that it is "the Ho Chi Minh Trail to power".

The labour market has been restructured to produce what Hartman calls "universal economic insecurity" and disparity. The disparity between the average wealth of white and black households in the US has gone from 8:1 in 1984 to 15:1 in 2009. The privatisation of primary and secondary education, emphasis on standardised testing and corporatisation of public higher education have ensured that we no longer benefit from the free thinking about who we aspire to be as human beings and the historically and philosophically based criticism of our culture that occurred generally on US college campuses from the 1960s into the 1980s.

Severe cuts in government funding and calls "to lash higher education to the realities and opportunities of the economy" have increased the cost to students of public colleges and universities. In the 1980s, US secretary of education William Bennett had strong views about the ideal curriculum for a humanities degree because he was passionately committed to the

humanities. Now, in times artificially made austere, normative conservative forces brand humanities degrees as unnecessary luxuries.

The culture wars began during the 1960s with a massing of forces so inchoate that Hartman's achievement in making clear sense of how the New Left and related groups came to be in alliance is one that ranks alongside the singing of the Homeric catalogue of ships. We see the period for what it was: a once-in-a-thousand-lifetimes historical accident.

The Black Power movement of the 1960s was, according to Malcolm X, "a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people". In 1960, 3,789,000 students were enrolled at US higher education institutions; in 1970, there were 7,852,000. The Vietnam War made them worry about their own fates and also, through what Mills calls "sociological imagination", about peoples of the world whose lives were threatened by war, poverty, racism, bigotry, political corruption, religious intolerance and economic oppression.

Back then we didn't "need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows". Now, says Hartman, "antiauthoritarian individualism...has become a commodity, no more, no less".