

The Culture Wars: A Reassessment

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Abstract:

The paper presents an overview and analysis of the current debate over the culture wars in America. The author concludes that — 1) Conflicts over art and culture are typically initiated and resolved in local communities, they are not primarily the result of national politics and strategic mobilization. 2) Conflicts are less the result of an out-of-touch art world at odds with the general public than of underlying tensions in a community, often caused by rapid demographic changes. In other words, art often just serves as a lightning rod for deeper concerns and anxieties. 3) There is no evidence that the culture wars are linked to fundamental cleavages over values and growing polarization of opinion regarding social and cultural issues. 4) Controversies often erupt into more intense battles when public officials disregard the decisions of professional staff and ignore established routines for selecting and reviewing controversial materials. 5) Public opinion surveys reveal that Americans remain ambivalent about First Amendment freedoms, often with a majority of respondents supporting restrictions of civil liberties.

Center for Arts and Culture
Background Essay
Art, Culture and the National Agenda

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From Horatio Greenough's half-naked sculpture of George Washington in a toga and sandals, intended for the new Capitol Rotunda, to Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, public art and cultural expression in America have been celebrated, censored, deplored and debated. In the last few decades, however, it seems as if the level and frequency of battles over art and culture have reached a fevered pitch. Art and cultural expression have been depicted on the front pages of our newspapers as a source of conflict over the boundaries of permissible expression in American communities. Conservative politicians and religious leaders have asserted that America is in the midst of a serious moral decline and have targeted artists, entertainment executives, journalists, librarians and institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts as both cause and symptom of this decline. Organizations like the Family Research Council, the American Family Association, and the Christian Coalition have called attention to allegedly blasphemous and obscene publicly funded art in order to mobilize constituents, raise money and help conservative politicians win elections.

On the left, civil libertarians, arts advocates and scholars have responded by labeling critics as philistines and censors and arguing that the First Amendment is being threatened as never before. Groups such as the People for the American Way and the American Library Association regularly publish reports calling attention to the "alarming" and growing number of attacks on artistic and intellectual freedom.

A firm understanding of the sources and dynamics of cultural conflict is essential for any policy maker, at the national or local level, who holds some responsibility for decisions relating to the creation and dissemination of cultural goods and creative expression. This essay will examine a set of questions whose answers (or tentative answers) will, hopefully, provide better leverage for understanding the culture wars in America. In particular, to what extent do the culture wars simply reflect the political posturing and issue entrepreneurship of the nation's elite or to what extent are they indicative of serious cleavages and polarization of opinion and values amongst the American public? Are conflicts the result of an "out-of-touch" art world, whose creative expression is fundamentally at odds with the core values of the American people? When do conflicts get resolved peacefully and in a democratic fashion and when do they degenerate into strident, bitter and uncivil confrontations? Finally, to what extent are participants in conflicts, and the public more generally, mindful of civil liberties and rights of free expression, versus to what extent do citizens and public officials believe that restrictions on speech are appropriate means to control offensive and disagreeable ideas?

The Culture Wars: Politics, Polarization and the Polity

The most visible and strident battles – Mayor Giuliani's recent attack of the Brooklyn Museum, controversy over NEA funding of artwork deemed homoerotic (Mapplethorpe), blasphemous (Serrano) and obscene (Sprinkle); the Southern Baptist boycott of Disney -- have captured the national spotlight and have involved a cast of national actors on both sides of the issue -- from Jessie Helms, Reverend Donald

Wildmon, William Bennett and Bob Dole to museum directors, prominent artists and writers and First Amendment experts. However, it remains unclear whether these well-publicized battles are related to deeper tensions and concerns in the larger American public or whether they simply reflect political posturing and issue entrepreneurship among the nation's elite.

If the cultural wars are simply political posturing – more strategic mobilization than trench warfare -- then solutions for arts advocates might simply focus on winning the battle of public opinion by forming better arguments. However, if they are related to deep-seated polarization of opinion among the American public or to underlying tensions in a community, then policy makers might choose to pursue a more careful balance between creative expression and community tastes and standards.

Evidence suggests that most conflicts are not products of national politics, but instead, find their roots in cities and communities across America. Harer and Harris (1994) report that there were more than 2,000 attempts to censor books, magazines, films, plays and music in American communities during the 1980s. More recently, Judith Dobrzynski reported in the *New York Times* in 1997 that brush fires over the arts were spreading across the country to towns and cities, which have become "the new battle grounds" for cultural conflict (Dobrzynski 1997). And, initial evidence from the author's research on cultural conflict in American cities indicates that, on average, individual U.S. cities experienced more than 12 conflicts each between 1994 and 1998, with some cities experiencing as many as 25 conflicts. Furthermore, the vast majority of these conflicts do not involve the posturing of political office holders or seekers or the participation of national groups like the Moral Majority and the ACLU. Instead, they involve local

citizens expressing grievances against cultural works that are exhibited or made available locally. The conflicts appear to be initiated and resolved within the local community.

Are these local battles related to the types of polarization and fragmentation characterized by James Davidson Hunter and other culture war theorists as a struggle between conservative and evangelical Christians and liberal, secular humanists (the cultural elite) over the values that define America? (See Bolton 1992; Dubin 1992; Romanowski 1996). Evidence suggests that the short answer is no. For one, DiMaggio et al.'s (1996) analysis of public opinion surveys finds little evidence that Americans' attitudes toward cultural and social issues have become more polarized since the 1970s. Second, in relation to attitudes about public funding of the arts, we have not seen increasing polarization into "for" and "against" camps, but rather relatively stable, positive support for such funding throughout the American public (at levels between 52 and 62 percent – see DiMaggio and Pettit 2000). Finally, in the author's own analysis of cultural conflict in American cities, there is no evidence that conflict is greater in those cities where public opinion regarding civil liberties, homosexuality, or pornography tends toward a "two-camp" model.¹

Art as Objet Provocateur

Many scholars contend that conflict over art and culture is a natural outgrowth of the evolution of the avant-garde, as artists look for ever new ways to overturn

¹ This analysis is drawn from on-going research examining conflicts over art and cultural expression in 100 American cities between 1994 and 1998. Using newspaper search engines, every reported case of cultural conflict – defined as a public or official action or grievance expressed against a work of art or an historical/interpretative exhibit – will be identified in each city. Each case of conflict is being coded to

conventions and shock their audiences. In fact, Daniel Bell (1976:40) writes, "the legacy of modernism is that of the free, creative spirit at war with bourgeois society." Or, as Levy (1997:115) puts it, "the yawning gap of sensibility between artists and the general society renders clashes inevitable." These arguments lead to several possible policy outcomes for arts managers -- 1) do nothing and accept "inevitable clashes"; or 2) avoid controversy altogether by not funding or presenting contemporary and cutting-edge art (anecdotal evidence suggests that many local and state arts councils have adopted the latter approach, routinely avoiding such challenging work); or 3) consider ways to incorporate public opinion into decisions to commission or present works of art, including pre-exhibition focus groups to help reveal potential conflicts and to plan education and public outreach accordingly.² On the other hand, the content and style of the artwork might be of secondary importance to the fact that art, of all types, can serve as a lightning rod for existing community tensions. If this is the case, then public officials and arts administrators might examine ways to reveal and discuss those tensions rather than avoid them.

While it is certainly true that intentionally provocative artwork will often generate negative public reaction, my own research suggests that conflicts are not principally about the art itself, and, for the most part, do not revolve around blatantly provocative work produced by an "an out-of-touch" art world. For one, there are more conflicts at the local level involving grievances over popular culture than there are involving grievances

reveal who are the actors, what is the nature of their grievance, what remedies are they seeking and what is the outcome of the controversy.

² Education can go a long way in reducing the potential offense of a public artwork. In a study of public reaction to nudity in photographic art, the author found that when an Edward Weston photograph of a nude woman was displayed with accompanying information about the artist and the technique, viewers were much less likely to say the image was offensive, compared to the same photo without such information, and more likely to think such photography was worthy of government support

against modern, contemporary or fine arts. An initial review of conflicts in 28 U.S. cities, finds that popular arts and entertainment (films, rock and rap concerts, song lyrics, and videos) were the most frequently targeted category of expression— more common than fights over both the fine arts (murals, art exhibits, outdoor sculpture) and books (in libraries, public schools, and bookstores). It is difficult to blame the culture wars on an out-of-touch art world when most conflicts arise over immensely popular films and music.

Second, context is important. Art that is controversial in one community is often met with indifference or rousing acceptance in another. For example, a columnist for the *Commercial Appeal* contrasted the different public reactions in both Charlotte, North Carolina and Memphis, Tennessee to Tony Kushner's epic play "Angels in America", which deals with homosexual themes and contains frontal nudity and a graphic sexual episode. He writes, " It still fascinates me that Memphis - which has its share of ardent churchgoers - has not protested local funding of the same plays causing an uproar in Jesse Helms country." (Smith 1997). Similarly, unless the conditions for controversy are ripe, even the most rabble-rousing artist will sometimes fail to ignite a conflict. Perhaps the best example is artist Jim Richardson's attempt to draw attention to the issue of the flag burning amendment in 1989. Starting with one small charred American flag, Richardson escalated his protest by burning more and bigger and then by contacting veterans associations, newspapers, the U.S. Attorney's office, and the ACLU. But, to Richardson's dismay, after 6 weeks of flag burning, nobody seemed to care. In contrast, an exhibit in Phoenix, Arizona that focused on the iconography of the U.S. flag in American art, and included a presentation of the flag on the museum floor, was greeted with hostility,

protest, vandalism and threats from the city council, along with private patrons, to withdraw funds from the sponsoring museum.

The important point here is that we must get beyond the content of particular works of art and begin to examine the preconditions for conflict that make some communities more contentious than others when it comes to fighting over creative expression. The author's own research suggests that one of the most important underlying conditions for conflict is the extent to which a community is experiencing rapid population growth and an influx of immigrants. For example, in an analysis of cultural conflict in 37 cities between 1994 and 1999, the author found that in those cities ranking in the top ten in total number of controversies, the average population growth was 21 percent, compared to only 12.2 percent in the cities with the fewest number of conflicts (Tepper 2000). This suggests that arts conflicts may arise when different groups try to assert their values and cultural tastes over the values and tastes of competing groups during times of uncertainty and change.

Battles or Brushfires: Cultural Conflict and Democracy

Public art advocates often argue that controversy is part and parcel of the nature of art and cultural expression and public conflicts, disagreements and debate contribute to a healthy democracy. However, if it turns out that arts conflicts more often than not degenerate into fierce and uncivil battles, then the purposes of democracy are not well served. If, on the other hand, such conflicts are more likely to be brushfires, easy to ignite but equally easy to resolve in a democratic fashion, then we might more comfortably embrace the notion of conflict as part of the process of public art.

Strident battles, characterized by a breakdown of normal democratic processes, often feature one of the following three types of actions – the involvement of police; the initiation of a lawsuit; or the use of uncivil remarks by participants in an effort to discredit opponents (i.e., referring to opponents as liars, hypocrites, or elitists). An initial review of cases of conflict in U.S. cities suggest that brushfires, rather than strident battles, are more typical of arts conflicts. Only 15 percent of the identified cases (237) involved legal action; fewer than 5 percent involved police action; and, the vast majority of conflicts took place without name calling and attempts to discredit opponents. However, a small minority of conflicts do catch fire and escalate into acrimonious fights and costly legal battles. One of the most violent clashes occurred in 1974 in Kanawha County, West Virginia, where initial efforts by a school board member to remove books that she considered, "filthy, disgusting trash, unpatriotic and unduly favoring blacks" escalated into school boycotts, strikes, picketing, gunfire, and campaigns to bomb schools (Foerstel, 1994: 2). More recently, in Oklahoma City, complaints about obscene videos in the public library led to a police raid of private homes and local businesses to remove copies of the allegedly "obscene," Oscar-winning film *The Tin Drum*. With the help of the ACLU, local citizens sued the city in federal court for violating their First Amendment rights, winning the case and costing the city more than \$575,000 in legal fees.

Which factors facilitate the resolution of conflict and which tend to lead to the kinds of hyper-escalation and incivility found in the Kanawha County and the Oklahoma City cases? From the author's own research, two factors seem especially important. First, an established review process seems to decrease controversy. If a school, library or

public arts board has an established process for reviewing grievances, which includes opportunities for aggrieved parties to make their case before a specially designated committee, the various parties involved – opponents and defenders of an artwork – typically will accept the final decision without further protest. In the absence of a democratic outlet for resolving grievances, concerned parties may resort to less institutionalized forms of protest – demonstrations, lawsuits, acts of vandalism – or, they may escalate the nature of their demand (i.e., the resignation of responsible parties or the withdraw of public funds from sponsoring organization). Second, and related, controversies often erupt into more intense battles when public officials disregard the decisions of professional administrators (librarians, museum curators, arts council managers) and ignore the established routines for selecting and reviewing controversial materials. When elected officials wield their power to remove offensive materials against the recommendation of professional staff, they often find themselves in court, defending their actions against claims by citizens who feel their civil liberties (the "right to know/see/listen/read") have been violated.

Civil Liberties and Cultural Regulation

In American law schools today, the First Amendment is commonly held up as the essence of American democracy (Woodward 1994) and tolerance and free speech are assumed to be core American values. However, the frequency with which citizens and politicians try to restrict art and cultural expression around the country suggests that Americans might be guilty of a type of constitutional bravado (endorsing free speech principles but becoming “wary and occasionally even hostile when it comes to its

practices” (McMaster, 1999: 1). Nat Hentoff summed up this ambivalence toward the First Amendment in the title to his 1992 book, "Free Speech for Me – but not for Thee." It is worth asking, to what extent are citizens willing to restrict thought and expression that they find offensive? How salient are notions of civil liberties and free speech among the American public?

The evidence is mixed, but several national opinion surveys reveal that a surprising number of Americans are willing to restrict speech and cultural expression. For example, in the General Social Survey (Davis 1999), between 40 and 50 percent of all respondents over the last decade said they would be in favor of removing books from the local library that were either anti-religious in nature or that depicted homosexuality favorably. And, in a recent survey conducted by the Roper Center (1999), 54% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that "people should be allowed to display in a public place art that has content that might be offensive to others." According to the First Amendment Center, evidence from public opinion data, coupled with reports of actual attempts to restrict cultural expression at the local level, “offer substantial evidence that the state of the First Amendment is not good.” (McMaster, 1999:4).

National groups such as the First Amendment Center, The American Library Association, the National Campaign for Free Expression, the Freedom Forum and the American Booksellers Association have launched a variety of public information and education campaigns (e.g., Banned Book Week, Freedom Forum Medals) designed to shift public opinion in support of First Amendment freedoms. While educating the general public is a worthy goal, initial findings of the patterns of controversy suggest that local officials, rather than the public more broadly conceived, might be a more effective

audience to target for education. For one, Harer and Harris (1994:85) found that an overwhelming number of challenges to artworks culminate in an act of "censorship" when they involve individuals acting alone in an official capacity. In contrast, in those cases where individual citizen complaints are reviewed by established boards and committees, restrictions are less frequent. Second, there is evidence that when public officials disregard established procedures and curtail artistic expression, the result is often heated battles that can be costly to a community (both financially and emotionally). In light of this, it may be more important to educate elected local officials (rather than the American public more broadly conceived) on issues of local governance and the First Amendment. Such education could provide an honest appraisal of the balance between civil liberties and the legitimate interests of a community in regulating cultural expression that is perceived as harmful or as a threat to community standards.

Conclusion:

The findings in this essay suggest that the culture wars should be approached with caution, but not alarm. Controversies over art and culture are indeed prevalent in communities across the nation. More often than not, they reflect real underlying community tensions rather than simply being the product of national politics and strategic mobilization. And, given the ambivalent support for First Amendment freedoms as expressed in public opinion surveys, it is not surprising that citizens often seek to have artworks banned or restricted in some way. Nevertheless, most controversies are resolved in a democratic fashion through established routines for reviewing grievances. Rarely do conflicts escalate from brushfires to the kinds of intense battles that can

fracture a community. On the other hand, when public officials ignore such routines or embark on unilateral acts of cultural regulation, conflicts can become more intense, costly and acrimonious. The challenge for policy makers is to help local officials better understand the potential costs of such intervention and to provide guidelines for where, how and when restrictions on cultural works is both appropriate and legal.

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