

Introduction: The Ideological Discourse of Cultural Discontent

PARADOXES, REALITIES, AND ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF THINKING

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POLITICAL and academic arguments about social justice over the last decade—and the controversies they ignited—have shown a notably cultural face. The language is revealing: moral majority, family values, cultural pluralism, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and culture wars. Wuthnow (ch. 2 in this vol.) refers to this development as a “discourse of discontent.” It reaches deeply into American social structure, identifying crises in family, marriage, religion, education, and race relations. This discourse also draws attention to shifts in social behavior and social process, pointing to public displays of homosexuality and cultural difference, massive new waves of legal and illegal immigration, and economic and cultural globalization. Moreover, this growing chorus of complaint has struck a chord in American public life because it meshes with *cultural* themes that carry great symbolic weight.

The core of the complaint concerns common values in American society. Critics at both ends of the political spectrum claim that such values are disappearing or have disappeared. Conservatives complain that the solidarity of American society has become fragmented, that the very fabric of society has been ruptured. They claim that unprecedented developments are undermining the cultural homogeneity on which a democratic society depends. In response, conservatives assert, traditional values must be revitalized. For their part, radical critics celebrate the end of common cultural values. Arguing that *diversity* and *difference* constitute the high moral goods of society, they view any attempt to connect this diversity to shared values oppressive. In the academy, this leftist position has contributed to the appearance and vitality of “cultural studies,” a new field challenging traditional disciplinary authority. Originating in British neo-Marxism and highly influenced by Foucault, cultural studies stress hegemony rather than common culture, and domination rather than civil solidarity. It has been in centers of cultural studies that the more radical programs in race, gender, and ethnic studies have been launched.

A glance at earlier twentieth-century periods of intense, polarized cultural conflict highlights not only the uniqueness of the contemporary cultural emphasis but also the unique polarizing nature of this rhetoric.

- In the 1930s, American society experienced intense and divisive social conflict. Because this crisis was triggered by the collapse of the American economy and its consequent large-scale unemployment and poverty, the dominant frames of discourse in that era were those of economic and political stability, the viability of capitalism as compared with socialist alternatives, and the possibilities of achieving social justice through structural reforms. Although cultural themes certainly were not absent, the integrity of American cultural values did not enter significantly into the conflicting social and political dialogues of the time. Indeed, as many have since pointed out, the “popular front” ideology espoused by the left in the 1930s was as “American as apple pie.”
- In the 1960s, dramatic and polarizing turmoil was triggered by demands—first by African Americans, later by feminists and by other racial minorities—for deepening the nation’s long-established constitutional and cultural commitments to civil rights. Countercultural issues of the youth movement sometimes obscured this traditional framing, as did the often violent conflicts generated by the moral and political debacle of the Vietnam War. The discursive framework of that decade of protest, however, was clearly established by the model of citizenship. Social justice and inclusion were to be achieved by making citizenship more real for outgroups and more binding for ingroups. Radicals and conservatives both agreed on the necessity for achieving greater “equality of opportunity,” the cultural theme that Tocqueville had already discerned in American society almost a century and a half earlier.
- During the last period of massive immigration, from the 1880s to the early 1920s, conflict over economic and political issues was indeed permeated by rhetoric about the salience and stability of traditional cultural values. Conservative WASP intellectuals raised cries of alarm that the new, largely Catholic and Jewish immigration would undermine homogeneity. In mounting a defense of the new immigrant groups, progressive intellectuals proclaimed not only that they could easily be assimilated—that immigrant values were complementary to traditional American ones—but that the new immigrants fervently sought such cultural incorporation. From the current perspective, what is remarkable about this debate is that the existence and legitimacy of a dominant, “hegemonic” national culture was assumed on all sides. American culture was not itself the object of debate. The issue that divided Americans was whether or not immigrant groups could be brought to come to terms with it.

The uniquely cultural orientation of contemporary social complaints and conflicts, however, should not imply that we ourselves should adopt a purely “culturalist” approach in studying them. Of course, we must do our best to understand radical and conservative complaints interpretatively, from within their own framework of ideas and symbols. At the same time, as social scientists we must remain skeptical of the reality claims that emanate from the contenders on both sides. Our goal is not simply to provide a “thick description” of these discourses, to employ the term by which Clifford Geertz (1973a) illuminated hermeneutical interpretation, but to explain them as well. In order to achieve

this goal, we must examine these critical complaints not simply from the inside (as coherent cultural discourses) but from the outside (as ideological constructions).¹

Moreover, rather than simply understanding the symbolic structure of ideology (Geertz 1973b), we are interested in finding out whether these discourses are realistic descriptions of contemporary American society or whether they distort it in potentially damaging ways. Does the widely shared discourse of complaint fairly represent the actual practices of Americans today? Does it accurately and responsibly describe contemporary institutions and interactions? The discourse of discontent has been created by intellectuals of the left and the right and has become part of the rhetoric of political leaders and aspirants, ideologically sophisticated media figures, and highly visible "movement intellectuals" (Eyerman and Jameson 1990) who articulate and oppose ethnic, racial, and gender programs. How deeply do these frameworks actually inform the ideas of those who organize routine social practice? As we shall show, the evidence suggests that although the critics of the right and the left refer to society-wide crisis and polarization, their theories and rhetorics neither penetrate nor reflect the routine politics of the nation, institutional activities at the grass roots, or the attitudes, cares, and interactions of the proverbial person in the street.

SOME PARADOXES, AND THE LOSS OF COMMON GROUND

In regarding the contemporary discourse of discontent as an ideology, we note some striking paradoxes. (In doing so, we move toward developing a political sociology of the cultural turn.) The first paradox concerns what might be called a contrast between culture and materiality. The current cultural framing of national crisis has occurred almost at the expense of traditional claims about economic injustice. During the two decades beginning in 1973, economic conditions for many Americans actually declined. The real wages of much of the country's labor force fell, and the distribution of income became more regressive. The interrelated social problems of poverty, homelessness, drug use, and crime also worsened during those decades. Yet, although these socioeconomic problems have remained the focus of substantial attention in government and in policy-oriented academic circles, they have been given little systematic attention in contemporary cultural debates.

A second, related paradox concerns the social status of the movement intellectuals themselves. The left, or "progressive," participants in this cultural complaint often represent groups that have experienced significant economic, status, and political gains in the past three decades. For women, working- and middle-class members of disadvantaged racial groups, and other traditionally stigmatized minorities these gains have been uneven and hard fought, to be sure, but they are real and have been documented in statistics about income, occupational mobility, intermarriage, and even to a modest degree residential segrega-

tion. In an oddly parallel fashion, conservatives often come from members of elite, high-prestige groups who have also experienced gains in income and wealth in the two decades of wage stagnation and more regressive distribution. The normal logic of class and status deprivation does not promise an adequate explanation for the discourse of discontent.

The most striking anomaly of the current situation is that it has made strange bedfellows on the left and the right. Those who have created the contemporary sense of cultural polarization find common ground in the claim that, in contemporary America, common ground no longer exists. Conservative ideologists launch an apocalyptic complaint that contemporary developments are destroying common values, and the critical left seems to agree.

Nowhere is this anomaly more striking than in the public controversies over multiculturalism. Rather than viewing claims for increasing recognition of diversity as responses to discrimination, inequality, and exclusion, conservative critics claim that such demands actually introduce divisions where none existed before. Thus, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., former Kennedy liberal and cosmopolitan thinker, blames multicultural activists for reviving "ancient prejudices" (1991: 15). By "exaggerating differences," he writes, "the cult of ethnicity . . . intensifies resentments and antagonisms," producing "a nation of minorities [and] makes it appear that membership in one or another ethnic group is the basic American experience" (112). On this basis Schlesinger argues that multiculturalism has undermined the solidarity necessary for American democracy. "The cult of ethnicity," he laments, "has reversed the movement of American history," and he condemns it for "breaking the bonds of cohesion—common ideals, common political institutions, common language, common culture, common fate—that holds the republic together" (13). More strident neoconservatives denounce multiculturalism as itself a new form of racism, one directed against the white majority. D'Sousa denounces "the new separatism" and likens it to defending the South African apartheid regime (1992: 30). For Kimball, multiculturalism, "far from being a means of securing ethnic and racial inequality," is "an instrument for promoting ideological separatism based on . . . differences" (1992: 82). He asserts that "what we are facing is nothing less than the destruction of the fundamental premises that underlie . . . a liberal democratic polity" (65).

One might suppose that multicultural advocates would respond to such shrill and disparaging attacks by arguing that their approach does nothing of the kind but that multiculturalism merely articulates and extends long-standing American values of tolerance of diversity. The paradox is that they argue in an opposite way. Some of the most articulate and publicly visible multiculturalists argue that their movement is indeed destructive of the traditional concept of American community. In her influential philosophical treatise *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young (1990) proposes as her normative ideal a social system of insulated but equally empowered groups who, rather than experiencing some shared humanity and solidarity, simply grant one another the right to pursue their distinct and "different" lifestyles and goals. In her presidential

address to the Modern Language Association in 1990, Catharine Stimpson, the well-known feminist literary scholar, described multiculturalism as “treating society as the sum of several equally valuable *but distinct* racial and ethnic groups (1992: 43–44; italics added). At the same meeting, the editor of the omnibus *Health Anthology of American Literature* defended his textbook’s emphasis on race and gender by insisting, “I know of no standard of judgment . . . which transcends the particularities of time and place . . . of politics” (Kimball 1992: 75). In another scholarly presentation at the MLA, a Shakespearean scholar justified the need for a multicultural approach to literature by highlighting the boundedness of his own particular identity. Reading the work of a black woman author, he explained, “I do not enter into a transcendent human interaction but become more aware of my whiteness and maleness, social categories that shape my being” (Kimball 1992: 69). In another context, Molefi Kete Asante, chair of the Department of African American Studies at Temple University, justified Afrocentrism on the grounds that even for Black Americans, “our Africanity is our ultimate reality” (quoted in Schlesinger 1991: 65). “The idea of ‘mainstream American’,” he writes, “is nothing more than an additional myth meant to maintain Eurocentric hegemony” (305).

What emerges from these polarizing and mutually reinforcing discourses is a further weakening of the intellectual middle ground, of the possibility for finding a progressive but democratic “vital center” (a formula for politics advocated in an earlier era by Schlesinger [1949]) that can create grounds for ideological consensus and the resolution of political conflict in American public life. Such ideological fragmentation, of course, reinforces recent political developments. Liberal politicians and intellectuals were stigmatized throughout the 1980s and 1990s from the right during the Reagan and Bush administrations as being soft on family values, crime, drugs, pornography, and heterosexuality, all of which touch upon core American values. During this same period—and earlier—the same liberal intellectuals were attacked from the left by an ideology that viewed them as part of a hegemonic establishment, thus denying them the possibility of articulating authentic, progressive values and programs.

We can appreciate the powerful combination of social and intellectual forces that have driven some of the middle to the right and some to the left, yet we believe it is important to assert the continuing vitality of the middle ground. It is justified on normative grounds, because mutual understanding is the key to mutual respect, deliberative democracy, engaged debate, and affirming citizenship. The middle position is also justified on empirical grounds; our belief is that more common ground exists than protagonists of discontent allow. Both left and right have an unjustifiably “thin” (Walzer 1994) appreciation of what kind of solidarity is required in a highly differentiated, diverse, and inclusive civil society. From the right comes a hope for the regeneration of solidarity through the reassertion of common family, religious, and community values—a vision that reveals an impoverished sense of the richness and multiplicity of social institutions and attitudes that constitute civil solidarity. From the left comes a minimalist, procedural vision suggesting that democratic solidarity can

be constituted by elaborating the sociological equivalents of what Isaiah Berlin called negative liberties—protection and tolerance of differences and the promotion of formal respect.

As if realizing the inadequacy of such visions of solidarity, both right and left, while scarcely denouncing democracy, sometimes advocate more coercive roads to solidarity. The right would implement a governmental program of cultural homogeneity, replete with media censorship and English-only language rules, and would supplement this cultural program with tough laws and sanctions against immigration, criminals, drugs, pornography, and sexual deviation. Some intellectuals on the left have also been drawn to direct forms of control, not only to hegemonic assertions of political correctness but also to legal restrictions on hate speech and pornography, and to “requirements” for diversity throughout the educational system. These temptations signify, to us, an uneasiness on both sides with the utopian visions of solidarity that each embraces.

In the remainder of this introduction we undertake to examine the adequacy of the culture of discontent according to traditional theoretical and empirical criteria of social science. This summary will suggest that social and cultural polarization is neither as unprecedented nor as dramatic as some discontented intellectuals and political figures believe. We will also advance the claim, based on documentation provided by the essays in this book, that there are good reasons to believe that a vital center persists in American society, both despite and because of the intensity of social change we continue to experience.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED IN THIS VOLUME

We may now confess to an initial sense of apprehension when we convened our conference on Common Values, Social Diversity, and Cultural Conflict. We feared that we and our participants would produce nothing new, that we would fall into the polarizations that the current cultural debates have produced, and that we would embrace the presuppositions and language of these debates rather than problematize them. In light of these initial fears, we were surprised at the degree of objectivity achieved, both from the causes and positions participants personally favored and from their feelings about those they opposed. We were even more surprised by the convergence if not consensus on the part of scholars gathered. We will now attempt to distill this convergence.

A Historical Glance at Contemporary Realities. It seems clear that the contemporary sense of decline of and anxiety about social cohesion is nothing new. From the beginnings of the Republic, institutional and social change has been constant, creating periodic crises of confidence and spasms of concern about national stability, social cohesion, and democracy itself. Immigration has been a continual sore spot, and the urban areas that have received immigrants have long been decried as sources of culturally threatening diversity, corruption, and immorality. Changing sexual mores and gender roles and the shifts in family

structure they induce have been obsessions since at least the 1920s. Proclamations of religious decline have permeated American culture since the end of the seventeenth century. Claims that diversity has corroded the nation's schools, undermining their ability to provide a common culture, have been evident since the early nineteenth century.

The example of education underscores these points. Contemporary cultural critics are alarmed by what they see as pandering to particularism in American schools. These critics have forgotten that parochial education, now respectable, is itself a product of a social movement, begun more than a century ago, that contemporaries viewed as particularistic and threatening to Protestant American values and beliefs. Catholic parents withdrew from secular public schools so they could educate their children in a way more consonant with their religious values. Courts ruled that such particularism was constitutional. Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Jewish educational institutions have been similarly protected.

This historical perspective on cultural discontent should moderate both contemporary alarm and contemporary hope, and caution us not to yield to the tempting assumptions that our times are unique and that history is not relevant. The nation does not seem to be at an unprecedented turning point.

The second thing we discovered is that common values are still a social reality. National surveys report that Americans continue to believe in democracy, in the opportunity for social mobility, and in the value of American life. In her chapter Zelizer (ch. 9) shows how an expanding commercialized popular culture—reflected in everything from musical hits and sports stars to fast food and afternoon talk shows—is a homogenizing cultural focus that pervades differences of region, ethnicity, and social class.

This sense of shared culture and tradition—whether authentic or ersatz—can be seen both in America's national symbolic icons and narratives and in specific institutional arenas. Those divorced still express support for marriage and typically remarry, and homosexual men and women legitimate their choices by stressing their ability to sustain stable monogamous relationships. Stepparents, separated parents, and other members of "affinal" family networks assert in words and deeds that their primary concern remains their children's well-being—hence the great variety of invented institutional arrangements that have emerged to provide for children's financial and emotional stability.

The desire for a common national education continues to be widely accepted. Teachers and parents believe that elementary schools should concentrate on both academics and democratic values, and surveys of students reveal that they continue to cite traditional heroes and heroines as the central figures in our national myths. Church attendance is on the upswing, and religious revivalism permeates majority and minority denominations alike. Although ethnic and racial minorities demand economic goods that reflect their particular lifestyles and tastes, these preferences are expressed as variations on mass-produced and widely consumed popular commodities. Immigrants continue to make learning English a primary goal, and they express a faith in the opportunity and open-

ness of their adopted land that is often stronger than those who have been here for generations.

When opportunities for interaction arise, members of “majority” and “minority” groups are increasingly marrying one another—even African Americans and other groups—which historically has been the focus of the strongest and most intractable taboo. This is more than propinquity; social conventions have come to regard intermarriage as acceptable if not completely legitimate to a greater degree than ever before.

If the sense of crisis that critics argue Americans are experiencing has been more or less resolved at many earlier times in our national history, and if national and democratic values are still widely shared, we might ask what the problem is. Why is there a sense of cultural crisis, a sense that social change is out of control? In response to these questions the contributors to this volume have provided important insights.

Social Change and “Cultural Work.” Deep and irreversible structural changes have been experienced in American society, changes that have created challenges to long-standing, traditional expectations and routines. Role structures, for example, have become more complex. New occupational categories have been produced and others eliminated, not only in the sphere of production (computer specialists have replaced typesetters) but in the service sector as well (professional mediators, addiction counselors, cultural sensitivity trainers have grown out of roles previously performed by lawyers, physicians, and teachers). As new roles form and old ones are threatened, groups emerge to advance them or to defend them, and new claims are made for social legitimacy. Another ongoing structural process involves the fashioning of new forms of social integration required to deal with growing complexity. New forms of mediation develop: citizenship becomes more elaborated, overarching values become more generalized and less particularistic, and new situational norms must be continually invented and applied. In the American case, the processes of complexity and integration are complicated by new levels of cultural diversity. Successive waves of immigration and emigration mean that traditional roles have new occupants, and expanded citizenship rights are expected to apply to people with different customs and backgrounds. When a society is continually changing with respect to both differentiation and integration, and when demands are made more complex by increasing cultural diversity, new sources of anomie are bound to emerge. These ambiguities stir up demands for cultural interpretation, accommodation, and recognition.

Structural changes of this sort are complex and open-ended. They do not move the society in one clear direction or another; they are multitracked rather than unilinear. They seldom produce unequivocal, totalistic effects. The cultural discourse of discontent, however, tends to go for single or either-or formulations, such as “loss of values,” “fragmentation,” “decline of community,” “corrupt values,” “irresponsible leaders,” “hegemonic patterns,” or “modernity vs. postmodernity.” These formulations give us little insight into the specifics of these strains, either what caused them or what, if anything, can be done to resolve them.

The facts suggest that despite deep structural strains and cultural polarization, the contemporary American situation cannot realistically be read in either-or terms—whether there are common values or not, whether there is stability or chaos, whether there is tradition or modernity or postmodernity. Indeed, much social conflict in America today is characterized by reference to the *same* set of values. For example, both advocates for and opponents of affirmative action refer many of their arguments to the same value principle, equality of opportunity (Smelser 1998). Cohen (ch. 13: 276) articulates this point in noting that “contestation over past institutionalizations and struggles over cultural hegemony—over the power to name, signify, and interpret norms and national identity—are not necessarily signs of social disintegration, or moral decay.” Rather, she argues, “open, public, even conflictual pluralization . . . can be a response to change” that has the aim of realizing or institutionalizing shared democratic principles.

The misunderstandings of contemporary social conflict rest on a theoretical confusion as well. What is missing from the discourse about cultural values is an understanding of the intermediate, mediating character of social norms. Values are very general statements of desirable social conditions or states of affairs. Norms “realize” values in the sense that they specify situations and contexts in which values apply and generate rules for conduct in those situations and contexts. This realization is always problematic, however, because there is always an element of ambiguity, or slippage, or interested disagreement about the links between values and norms. Is a rule or norm a legitimate interpretation of the values in the name of which it is implemented? Or, to put the question in a distinctively American context, is a given law (norm) constitutional (consistent with general principles)?

The ambiguous relations between values and norms raises questions about the nature of conflict and criticism. In many cases it is norms, not values, that are addressed. As Wuthnow (ch. 2: 25) observes about debates about the family, “it is more about how best to attain a certain value than about whether that value is worth attaining at all.” Similarly, in his analysis of conflicts over sexuality, Seidman (ch. 8: 177) suggests that “the differences are usually quite specific and occur within a network of shared beliefs. . . . Divisions over abortion mostly pivot on disagreement over when life begins, not on a woman’s right to have sex, not on the value of her life and the life of children, and not on broader social and sexual values such as the individual’s right to choose to be sexual, the linking of sex to affection or love, [or] the importance of family.”

In the face of profound structural changes, the most frequent challenge is to create new norms to bring the changed conditions under the umbrella of general values. However, we find little space for this pragmatic kind of response within the perspectives of either “traditional” intellectuals, who react against recent social changes, or “emancipated” intellectuals, who seek to legitimate them. On the contrary, by depicting changing social conditions as either-or, they suggest that traditional values must be affirmed, which allows little normative flexibility (the conservative position), or that traditional values should be discarded (the emancipated position), which denies that norms must be legitimized by cultural

values. These polarized reactions obscure the principal fact that new forms of normative mediation evolve through cultural work, group negotiation, legal interpretation, and institutional experimentation.

Family and Sexuality. The intimate spheres of American life have experienced radical change. Women have entered the workplace and civil society; marriage is being postponed; sexuality is being separated not only from love but from gender ascription; parenting responsibilities are less tightly linked to procreation or kinship. As Seidman points out and Furstenburg's demographic data confirm, these are accelerations of a century of change; but "it was [only] in the 1960s and 1970s" that these shifts "emerged into public view and became the focus of major social conflicts" (ch. 8: 174).

Conservatives respond to these shifting patterns by demanding the restoration of the traditional, gender-divided, intact nuclear family. An outcry over the dissolution of family values, however, can have little effect on the broad patterns of family and affectual change. Concentrating on generalized values, moreover, leaves little room for legitimate forms of normative mediation. Radical, postmodern advocates of these emerging patterns seem equally wide of the mark. They argue that the very idea of the family should be abandoned, that society should organize intimacy and socialization in entirely different ways. Ignoring the need to link concrete practices with generalized values, their position also abandons the issue of normative mediation of social behavior and social change.

When one examines actual practices, one finds that the level of normative mediation is, in fact, both evident and important. Seidman's findings reveal that many actors participating in these new institutional arrangements have been employing what Seidman calls a "communicative ethic" to justify their nontraditional engagements by emphasizing the ideals of individual choice, responsibility, consensus, and toleration for pluralism and by recognizing the importance of a pragmatic approach to morality that looks to the contents of interaction rather than to dogmatic moral standards. Looking toward institutional practices, such an ethic has the flexibility to cover wide substantive differences. As Seidman (ch. 8: 184) suggests, "such an ethical standpoint legitimates a plurality of sexual practices and patterns of intimacy, including different kinds of families." While justifying divergent practices, however, the communicative norm also submits them to a set of ethical standards. Such explicit evaluation allows this emergent norm of intimacy to look toward general values as well. The idioms of this ethic about family and intimacy are drawn from the traditional American discourse about liberty, which idealizes democracy in a pragmatic, consensual, and pluralistic manner (Alexander and Smith 1992).

Immigration and Multiculturalism. For the first three centuries of American history, immigration was virtually a demographic necessity, an adaptation by a modernizing and aggressively expansive nation to a vast and underpopulated physical space. Similarly, the post-1965 immigration wave can be understood as

a response to America's position in the global political economy, in which continent-spanning migration has become typical, economic organization has become more mobile, and the profitability of labor markets is evaluated internationally as well as locally. Not only are immigrants responding to less favorable home conditions but global economic restructuring has made America itself increasingly dependent on the motivation and social capital that new economic immigrants provide.

A similar point can be made about the demographic aspects of the new multiculturalism. Following four decades of low immigration—a midcentury pause that provided sustained opportunities for assimilation—the recent period has brought huge populations of mainly Latins and Asians into the United States. During this same period the effects of civil rights legislation and affirmative action have allowed historically displaced domestic populations the opportunity to enter mainstream institutions at unprecedented rates. As Higham (ch. 3) points out, because this extraordinary growth in heterogeneity has occurred within a compressed time frame, the capacity to “assimilate” in traditional ways is lessened. In separate essays Fischer (ch. 10) underscores the continuing power of the assimilative mode. Tienda (ch. 6), although not denying this power, stresses some evident strains and more threatening possibilities. Forces other than demographic are also involved in producing the multicultural alternative to assimilation. Since the 1960s a distinct “deprimordialization” of America's mainstream values has occurred. This cultural movement away from provincialism toward cosmopolitanism has made the ideals of homogeneity and ethnic deracination much less compelling. These are the underlying structural reasons for the turn to more multicultural criteria for incorporation.

Yet in their constructions of immigration and multiculturalism, conservative critics paint them as out-of-control social problems and present them not as structural processes but as the results of wrong values and threatening people. Defending their version of “classical republican” values (Cohen), these conservatives critically compare the new heterogeneity with a nostalgic version of a homogeneous American culture emptied of ethnic and racial difference. According to their map of the good society, consensually agreed-upon substantive values can and should control differentiated institutions and segmented interactions in a direct way. As we have noted, the positions of radical multiculturalists mirror the conservative arguments in important ways. Demanding that difference should be honored, they envision a society organized around separated yet mutually respectful segmented groups. Implying that normative standards of interaction can and should emerge from heterogeneity per se, this argument ignores not only the need for legitimization vis-à-vis cultural values but the fact that normative mediation itself must manifest an ethical intent.

When we look to empirical processes in the society we find, again, that many involved in disputes over immigration and multiculturalism are engaged in “normative work.” As Farley (ch. 5) reminds us, it was the respecification of American values in law—not only the 1960s civil rights legislation articulating new definitions of voting rights, fair employment practices, and open housing,

but also the Celler immigration act of 1965—that established the conditions for heterogeneity that are at the middle of the contemporary debate. Legal articulation and legitimization have continued to mediate and moderate immigrants' access to schools, education, welfare, and citizenship.

Important as legal mediation is in regulating the turmoil over “difference,” however, the very qualities that make it a neutral arbiter—abstract universalism, emphasis on procedural regularities—also constitute its limitations. Legal rationality ensures continuity and flexibility for new institutional arrangements; it does not, however, legitimate them. This requires linking those arrangements to substantive values and ethical ideals.

Higham (ch. 3) describes how this sort of link was achieved in the double-sided response to earlier waves of American immigration. With the passage of the national origins law sharply restricting immigration in 1924, an “intensely racialized nativism” seemed triumphantly poised to primordialize national values. What happened, however, was different. On the one hand, many younger ideological leaders of the ethnic Protestant core group rejected their elders' particularism and moved to embrace the “deviant,” denigrated cultural orientations of excluded ethnic and racial groups: “Young intellectuals, in rebellion against their own ethnic origins, were no longer guardians of the inherited culture[;] they were becoming its adversaries” (51). At the same time, new, more pluralistic and multiethnic constellations of American values emerged from the outgroups themselves. Noting the “enormous yearning on the part of the immigrants and their children to become Americans,” Higham observes that from the 1920s onward “a common process drove people in many disparate ethnic enclaves to redefine themselves in more open and inclusive ways” (52). For example, “the small middle class of southern and eastern European derivation was expanding, receiving some civic recognition, and joining the movement from cities to suburbs.” Within the immigrant working class, “ethnic nationalism correspondingly yielded to a common working class culture.” The result was that “all of the institutions of ethnic culture weakened” and there was a “rebuilding and extending [of] the tradition of American universalism” (53).

We find some parallels in the ways immigration and incorporation are being mediated today. Many “mainstream” Americans and “white” intellectuals have abandoned the restrictive ethical orientations of their own ethnic and racial groups—orientations that were dominant only a generation ago. This shift can be seen, moreover, in the discourse of discontent itself. As Fischer (ch. 10: 217) remarks, “the nativist reaction to ‘brown’ and ‘yellow’ immigrants today is notably milder than nativist reactions were to ‘white’ immigrants in earlier eras.” For their part, even in this multicultural age, recent immigrant ethnic and racial groups have shown a willingness to accept “Americanism” in exchange for their “particular” and “foreign” values. As Fischer observes, “the trend lines look similar to those of the [earlier immigrant] Europeans: increasing spatial dispersion away from enclaves, loss of language in later generations, and increasing intermarriage” (218).

Although the radical multicultural position advocated by many spokespersons for minority groups seems to contradict this connectivity, the actual political

and social movements advocating multiculturalism consistently employ a civil-society discourse. This discourse presents particular claims for recognition as legitimate refractions of traditional American democracy itself. Hollinger (ch. 12: 256) remarks, moreover, that “a growing appreciation for the value of multiple identities and solidarities, especially those transcending color, has helped in the 1990s to stimulate a new engagement with civic nationality in the United States.” Hollinger’s empirical observation dovetails with Benhabib’s (ch. 14: 293) plea for a new “sociological skepticism vis-à-vis group-differentiated rights claims.” Suggesting that “the normative haste with which political philosophers have [sympathetically] responded to identity/difference politics has prevented us from analyzing the social dynamics of the politics of recognition,” Benhabib argues that “the result has been, more often than not, a premature reification of group identities rather than a critical interrogation of their limits as well as illusions” (293).

Education, Religion, and Voluntary Organization. In education, too, polarized cultural rhetoric has obscured emergent processes of normative mediation. Tyack (ch. 4) shows that “school wars” in America are nothing new. American society has continually incorporated outgroups through a complex interplay between affirming traditional national values and expanding and hyphenating them. What is new is that the contemporary public confrontation between these contending positions is visible and evenly divided. Formerly dominated racial and ethnic groups and newly arrived immigrant groups fight against homogenizing school curriculum and pedagogy with an aggressive self-confidence that signifies continued involvement in these institutions and continuing faith in education itself. In response to these demands for new normative mediation between ethnicity and tradition, moreover, contemporary custodians of public and private education have assumed an open, ready-to-compromise stance.

With respect to religion, cultural critics argue that secularization and expressive individualism have privatized American spiritual life, creating fragmentation and egoism that exacerbate social conflict and erode moral integration. Warner (ch. 11) shows, on the contrary, that the increasingly open religious conflict in America reflects underlying structural shifts. These new conflicts should be viewed not as simple divisions but as new modes of religiosity, as outlets for expressing increasing social complexity and decentralization. American religion has, from this perspective, become more differentiated and segmented, but Warner stresses it has not, for all of that, become more private. True, demands for recognition of religious particularity seem to have displaced earlier efforts to articulate national statements about substantive religious consensus. Yet religious demonstrations of critical universalism and active citizenship—national values of a less substantive but equally democratic kind—have become more visible:

Although religion’s public face is less visible and less unifying at the national level today than a generation ago, local religious communities, individually or through local ministerial alliances, still make themselves felt to their neighbors. They promote char-

itable causes, from providing meals to elderly citizens to housing the homeless. They provide services, including resale shops, family counseling, after-school tutoring and courses in English as a second language. They host concerts and community meetings. They lobby city hall to collect the garbage, close down crack houses, and award development contracts to socially responsive builders. (ch. 11: 237)

The complaint about the disintegration of voluntary organizations provides a final illustration of this systematic overlooking of emerging levels of normative mediation. Because this complaint is framed within the Tocquevillian view of American civil society realized through local voluntary organizations, it has appealed to many. Nonetheless, as Cohen shows, the complaint ignores important dimensions of democracy articulated by other strands of civil-society theory, particularly the notions of "publicness," "legality," and "critical dialogue" by which the Pragmatic and Kantian traditions have highlighted the importance of expanded solidarity and equality. By ignoring these dimensions, the complaint about voluntary organizations ties itself to a defense of localism and focuses on the weakening traditional institutions such as the gender-divided family, the homogeneous community, and the consensus-building church.

We agree that long-term structural changes indeed have made local voluntary organizations of the traditional sort much less viable in contemporary American society. When women are in the work force, and when local institutions and neighborhoods are increasingly marked by heterogeneity and differentiation, there is neither local commitment nor personnel to sustain and staff unpaid voluntary associations. Does this mean, however, that the mediating role between state and economy that voluntary organizations performed has disappeared? Wuthnow's research demonstrates that the "independent sphere" in America has grown substantially, in the form of not-for-profit organizations run by paid professional staff. These nongovernmental agencies continue to perform many of the tasks administered by state bureaucracies in other democratic societies. In a word, the Tocquevillian specificity of American society remains in place, but it has been given a different structure. Cohen is right to suggest, moreover, that the group-specific ethical mediations between local groups and broader values—once effectively produced by voluntary organizations—are increasingly being formulated by national media that are themselves becoming more segmented and heterogeneous in the cable and computer age.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

In the 1960s and 1970s, American society, reacting to long-term structural shifts in society, was shaken by a series of critical and defensive social movements that polarized the nation. Since the 1980s structural changes in society have been accelerated, if anything, but the nation has been divided more by tense cultural conflicts between left and right than by social movements themselves. In this introduction we have drawn on the contributions to this book to

suggest an explanation for this cultural turn and to question the picture of polarization and crisis it depicts.

What we have found differs considerably from both the conservative and radical versions of the discourse of discontent. Beneath the shrill rhetoric of many intellectuals and opinion leaders, we have found a deep process of institutionalization at work. Despite the dire warnings of the right and the utopian claims of the left, the reformist projects of the movements of the 1960s have been realized to a great degree. Faced with the pressures of growing institutional complexity and cultural diversity, new forms of democratic integration have developed. Those working at the grass roots of American society have created new, normatively sanctioned organizational arrangements and new ways to negotiate conflicts. Traditional American values, rather than being fragmented or deconstructed, have not only provided a stabilizing anchor for these pragmatic responses but have stimulated them. As these normative innovations have developed, social polarization has lessened rather than increased, and a new consensus has been developing beneath the ideological surface. In identifying the misdiagnoses of both the left and the right we are far from claiming that "all is right with the world." But we are convinced that the assertions about the death of common values are premature at best.

NOTE

1. In doing this, we try to remove ourselves as much as possible from the concepts, language, assertions, and terms of debates employed by participants in these conflicts. This remove is demanded by our obligations as social scientists and by our broader intellectual and moral commitments to undistorted communication. Nevertheless, we make no claim to epistemological neutrality. As actors in the cultural and political realities of our time, we do not and can not aspire to a completely disembodied objectivity, and as social scientists we know that the very idea of such objectivity is escapist.

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