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

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A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars by Andrew Hartman, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Kicking off the season of year-end cultural assessments, Wesley Morris, in a recent edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, declared 2015 “The Year We Obsessed Over Identity.” Linking the creation of “alternate or auxiliary personae” to new technologies developed over the past decade, such as social media, Morris noted that our new identities “feel gleeful and liberating—and tied to an essentially American optimism.” The story recounts numerous instances of what I’ll call “identity bending” with regard to race, sexuality, and gender in popular culture, especially in movies, television, books, and music. Even academia gets a citation, when Morris recounts the “oddly compelling” Rachel Dolezal story (i.e. a white woman who self-identifies as “black,” with “unwavering certainty”). Morris continued, observing that “our rigidly enforced racial lines are finally breaking down.”¹

Wesley Morris does not pretend that this breakdown has resulted in some sort of choose-yourself post-racial utopia. Morris also doesn’t ignore the pushback, especially as heard in the rhetoric of emerging Republican presidential candidates (i.e. Donald Trump). But Morris doesn’t revise the historical timeline to anything much “more than a decade” for this identity bending. As is often typical when journalists recount the past leading up to their stories, the historical thinking is less expansive than might be hoped. Luckily we have Andrew Hartman’s excellent book, *A War for the Soul of America*, to demonstrate the limits of Morris’s historical thinking. Covering the post-World War II period, Hartman recounts a series of cultural and intellectual conflicts, in all their intensity, about identity and what it means to be an American.

The Historiographic Context

Hartman’s book has been well-received, piling up positive reviews, in most corners of our shared intellectual history community because he took his story of the Culture Wars into the heart and soul of the American project. That project is constantly reexamining itself. Indeed, Hartman argues that debates, not certainties, about the soul of America are baked into the American project. Culture wars in general reflect the centrality of identity examination and refashioning. In a 2010 blog post that previewed his book, Hartman underscored the essential American characteristic of self-examination in an analysis of Allan Bloom’s “über text” of the Culture Wars, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom had described his book as a “meditation on the state of our souls.” Hartman underscored the importance of the problem of “relativism” to Bloom, noting the latter’s theory about the idea of American culture as a “culture of becoming.”²

¹ Wesley Morris, “The Year We Obsessed Over Identity,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/magazine/the-year-we-obsessed-over-identity.html>.

² Andrew Hartman, “An Intellectual History of Culture as Becoming,” *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, March 3, 2010, <http://s-usih.org/2010/03/intellectual-history-of-culture-as.html>; Andrew Hartman, *A War*



Americans are a modern people in that they are constantly in movement and evolving. The potential to recreate one's self is part of the American Dream. That said, Hartman argues that the extended, intense, and self-conscious questioning that occurred from the 1960s through the early 1990s constitutes a special episode in American history deserving of our attention and intense analysis. To understand whether the Culture Wars era was, on balance, positive or negative, one must discern the nature, or kind, of story it was.

Hartman's provocative framing of the Culture Wars squares an objective synthesis of the characters and issues of the period. His objects of study are not unfamiliar to historians of the period, but Hartman's narrative changes the direction of past scholarship. He most certainly moves the conversation away from religion as a primary source Culture Wars problems, as argued by James Davison Hunter. Daniel Rodgers' 2011 book, *Age of Fracture* overlaid the Culture Wars period with the useful metaphor located in his book's title. Rodgers argued that Americans, since the 1960s, voluntarily reduced their larger "circles of we" into "little platoons of society" through the rise of libertarian ideologies, decentralization, and renewed engagement with individualism. Hartman has stated that he believes Rodgers' work downplayed politics and the real significance of cultural-political debates. Hartman also disagrees with those of us (myself, Dan Wickberg, Robert Genter, etc.) who see the Culture Wars of the Seventies, Eighties, and early Nineties as part of a longer continuum of modernity and reactions to it. To Hartman, earlier periods only consisted of elites and intellectuals confronting the "acids of modernity" such as relativism, subjectivism, Nietzsche's nihilism, and secularism. The rest of the population was mostly sheltered from those problems. The 1960s, however, saw a revolution that universalized discussions of identity and fracture such that the term "culture wars" best describes the period from the 1960s to the early 1990s. The Sixties were, to Hartman, truly a "cultural watershed."³

The watershed nature of that decade contrasted with the short-lived period during the late 1940s and 1950s where "powerful conservative norms" and "cultural standards" came together to enforce what Hartman calls "normative America." That conformist paradigm "prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own." That framework also posited "stringent sexual expectations" and "strict gender roles." The power ascribed by the author to this paradigm, at this point in history, is fundamental to understanding Hartman's book in relation to the historiography. As he says, postwar normative America "was more omnipresent, and more coercive, than it had been before or has been since."⁴

for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2, 21, chapter 8 (pp. 222-252)

³ Andrew Hartman, "Age of Fracture v. Age of Culture Wars," *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, March 11, 2015, <http://s-usih.org/2015/03/age-of-fracture-v-age-of-culture-wars.html>.

⁴ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 5.



A War for the Soul of America makes perfect sense as a narrative of the Culture Wars with this strong assumption in mind. Hartman’s historicizing of that period sets up both his conservative critics and historian opponents. The former are undercut by Hartman’s acknowledgment that the 1950s held forth some “positive” characteristics amidst the weeds of several ‘isms’—racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and conformism. The later historian critics, if they argue against his strong assumption, must confront masses of powerful historical scholarship on conformism of the 1950s.

Praise and Affirmations

Hartman’s book offers numerous historical specifics in support of his larger arguments. I found his evidence compelling. Since those incidents and actors have been covered in many other reviews, I want to focus on larger problematic ideas and philosophical elements, indicated in Hartman’s book, that demonstrate the lasting value of his text. Those expansive topics show how Americans were, in his study, implicitly and explicitly critiquing the narrative of America. I found somewhere over twenty larger ideas and big questions during my first read, but will relay just ten here (followed by the page or chapter where I observed them in the text).

1. Is society best organized around larger neutral principles friendly to individual aspirations, or around group solidarities in order to enable those group’s to overcome historical patterns of injustice? (p. 148)
2. Is colorblindness a worthy aspiration for American society, or does it mask injustices? Put another way, what are the strengths of ‘meritocracy’ as an ideal when the starting places of citizens are so different? (chapter 4)
3. The notion of a secular culture and the ‘secularization thesis’ animated a powerful cohort of religious-minded individuals during the Culture Wars (chapter three, esp. pp. 78-79). Religious conservatives and paleoconservatives “railed against the state as an agent of secularism,” but also, paradoxically, allied with neoconservatives to reshape government to their liking (p. 215-16). What, then, is the role of government in American life for religious conservatives?
4. What human traits are essential and/or biological, and which are constructed or contingent? What proportions of sameness and difference exist in the human species? These topics arise in discussions of race, gender, and sexuality (pp. 106-07, 139, 161).
5. What ideas are abstract and universal? What things are particular and circumstantial? Does the particular precede the universal, or vice versa? What certainties exist in life? If things are uncertain and relative, are we not a set of beings defined by ‘becoming’ and change? (pp. 21, 25, 155, 162, 232)
6. Does culture shape society, or does culture follow social realities? What is the power of culture? (pp. 178, 199)
7. The notions of standards, rigor, and excellence in education, at all levels, offered cover for institutional racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism (p. 233). How is excellence to be assessed when cultural difference is the norm?



8. Do we embrace or deny modernity and the Enlightenment? Is the Enlightenment a place to rest intellectually or not? According to the scholars of race, colonialism, and gender, it is not (p. 232, 265).

9. Revisionist complexity, which often relativized and historicized a unique past, was treated as a political obstacle to be destroyed by conservatives. Complexity was the enemy of national normative identity (pp. 279, 283).

10. Just as narratives and our national story became objects of debate, the notion of a book or text itself became the object of discussion, courtesy of Stanley Fish. Should one pay more attention to the text itself, or its circumstances of production? If not the text, then theory matters more than the material item of the publication. And the author has less agency in the process of creation, and canons themselves became cultural constructions. All textual hierarchies were conventions of time, place, circumstance, and power (p. 225).

Hartman deserves a great deal of credit for intellectualizing and integrating such a diverse array of issues into his narrative. The complexity of Hartman's text beckons us to think critically about what kind of story our nation is in.

Critiques and Provocations

Given this praise, what might have been handled better in the book? What was left out? My answers to these questions come from an attempt to look at Hartman's book from the far left. Consider my responses more provocations than criticisms.

Given how "the market" ideal, when incorporated into government institutions, often results in unstable social outcomes, I wondered why neoliberalism and its relationship with neoconservatism—both oriented toward market-focused solutions to governmental and social problems—was absent from Hartman's analysis. When identity is linked to economic benefits conferred by the government, surely government action or inaction might flare into debates about culture and identity. But in Hartman's text no historical actors are labeled 'neoliberal', and no events are attributed to neoliberalism. I suspect Hartman's reply to this might be that his historical actors didn't use the term—i.e. that the term is a late twentieth-century creation that comes after his period of concern. And he does cover that term in his post-publication analysis of the differences between his own work and Rodgers' *Age of Fracture*.⁵ But, for me anyway, that's not enough. The advent of neoliberalism, so important to our own historical moment and so crucial to understanding some of the political and cultural political confusion of the present, needs to be addressed in our analyses post-1960s Culture Wars events.

My lament about the omission of neoliberalism led me to wonder about economic class and labor as categories of analysis in relation to the Culture Wars. Class is kind of everywhere and nowhere in the text. My concern about labor and the working classes goes to the extent of rejection of normative America. How did everyday people receive these changes? How did they respond to various Culture Wars events? A thorough history of

⁵ Hartman, "Age of Fracture v. Age of Culture Wars."



working and lower class reception of—and participation in—the Culture Wars would go some way toward dispelling pervasive myths about “the Silent Majority.” And this line of questioning is relevant since Hartman argues that earlier periods, that might be subsumed under the “culture wars” framework, were more about elites and intellectuals confronting problems with modernity. As much as it is possible in terms of evidence (i.e. oral histories, small-town paper pieces, letters), a bottom-up history of the Culture Wars would help us understand better its class dynamics.

Is there a way to address class, head on, without succumbing to its ability to overshadow all else? If relative economic equality enabled the power and strength of normative America, as Hartman states (p. 290), did a relative slide toward inequality—which has been occurring since the 1970s alongside the growth of neoliberalism—enable more questioning, or a return to questioning, the ideals attributed to the soul of America? Does economic equality lessen questioning about that soul, or enable more philosophizing about it? Does economic or democratic socialism enable a stronger normative routine of life (and policing of normative values), or enable personal and social liberation, as the left argues?

Perhaps Hartman feared mixing the topics above into his cultural and intellectual elixir because of a strict desire to avoid Thomas Frank’s view of the Culture Wars as epiphenomenal, distracting readers from the “real” economic issues that matter, or ought to matter, to citizens and politicians? But does avoiding class analysis let Frank’s narrative, ironically, stand? Is there a way to integrate the excellent cultural and intellectual analysis offered by Hartman with Frank’s, such that the analyses are integrated rather than competing? I think Hartman’s conclusion about the power of capitalism (our “reigning American economic ideology”) to make “cultural revolution much likelier than social democracy” would make more sense if class had been dealt with more deliberately in the rest of the text (p. 290).

What of labor, work, and the soul of America? The idea of America is linked to our dreams and opportunities, which are, in part, about economic stability and the psychological benefits of steady work. Given that, how does one’s identity as a laborer factor into the Culture Wars? One must think with historians, such as Jefferson Cowie, about the dislocation of workers and decline of the American Dream in the 1970s and 1980s, during the prime years of the Culture Wars. As Joshua Zeitz recently pithily stated it: “The ‘70s were a punishing time for America’s working-class communities.”⁶ One way into this topic is music.

Hartman does not neglect music, but one could use it more to think about labor and capitalism. What kinds of stories were told in the music of the laboring or lower middle classes? How did the key of those classes register in terms of the tone, volume, and rhythm of wars over culture? If Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about the Culture Wars,

⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Joshua Zeitz, “Born to Run and the Decline of the American Dream,” *The Atlantic*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/born-to-run-at-40/402137/>.



what would it sound like? Surely those born the U.S.A., in the 1960s and 1970s, were running from the American Dream turned nightmare. What were the Culture Wars of the Rust Belt? Surely Billy Joel's "Allentown," or "Outlaw" country music, say something about the decline of laboring identities during the Culture Wars. Did the laboring blues of rock, country, metal, and rap attenuate or exacerbate Culture Wars events?

Cowie provides some evidence that might've inspired Hartman, or been the basis for further analysis of working-class reactions to the Culture Wars in Hartman's book. Chapter four of *Stayin' Alive* helps underscore the "class wars of the 1970s"—i.e. how the battles of labor became points of concern in cultural politics, especially in country music and the expansion of popular affection for that musical genre as it represented, seemingly, the common person. Cowie's text, overall, points toward the slow, painful decline of the identity of "worker," in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, and suggests (implicitly) that the decline may have fed the Culture Wars battles of the 1980s. When "working-class" became reduced to "industrial workers," due the inability of union leadership to change with the times, the possibility of "a more expansive notion of working-class identity" was eclipsed. One result, Cowie argues, was that "a republic of anxiety overtook a republic of security" in the 1970s.⁷

If certain popular dissatisfactions of the working-class could no longer be expressed through union actions or strikes, perhaps those frustrations resurfaced in debates about other identities, especially when racial and ethnic identities became the locus of some social, economic, and political benefits? The devaluation of the working class occurred as other identity formations increased in value. I do not mean to suggest that an integration of working classes into the events of Hartman's narrative necessarily involves a mass social-psychological theory (i.e. sublimation, return of the repressed, etc.). But perhaps a more granular exploration of working and lower-class participation in Culture Wars battles might provide a more thorough view of the range and limits of "identity" in the era—about the topics for which citizens might engage in cultural battles.

Conclusion

Despite these critiques and provocations, which really point toward future scholarly efforts, Hartman's book is now, in my judgment, a leading text in the canon of historical studies of the Culture Wars. Future books will have to go through Hartman, just as he has addressed Hunter and Rodgers in his work. My own questions could not have arisen if *A War for the Soul of America* hadn't forced me to rethink my own perspective on Culture Wars events—a perspective strongly colored by my prior work on the topic through the lens of the great books idea and literary canons. In the morass of debates about book lists, canonical authors, syllabi, and publishing projects, I sometimes lost track of other arenas and the larger implications of those battles. Courtesy of Hartman's book, none of us will forget that the Culture Wars get at Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's still relevant question: "What then is the American, this new man?"⁸

⁷ Cowie, 10, chapter four passim, 362, 368.

⁸ A quote Hartman uses on p. 2 of his text.



And, as Wesley Morris identified this fall, questions about identity have been especially relevant in 2015. Morris argues that “the yearning to transcend race keeps coming up against the bedrock cultural matter of separateness.” Extending the metaphor further, in a way that shows the continued relevance of older Culture Wars, Morris notes “the tectonic plates of the culture [of separateness] keep pushing against one another with greater, earthshaking force.” Whether or not one has more agency in choosing an identity, one still cannot control the perceptions and consequences of those choices in society at large, especially in relation to vocal, reactionary minorities. As Morris notes, “I live with two identities: mine and others’ perceptions of it.”⁹ Battles over identity may ebb and flow in American history, but the current iteration has revisited the intensity of historical episodes covered in Hartman’s book. Whether or not one agrees with his narrative or periodization, it’s hard to argue that an exploration of the Culture Wars is irrelevant today. Indeed, *A War for the Soul of America* happens to be a most excellent meditation on the topic.

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⁹ Morris, “Identity.”