

A Misguided Resolution to the Culture Wars

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Thirty years after the phrase came into vogue, the culture wars are alive and well—and more heated and complex than ever. A comprehensive peace is not in the cards. But in 2016 a decided advantage will go to the presidential candidates who understand the enduring grounds on which reasonable members of the rival camps can agree to disagree.

Republican primary voters' enthusiasm for a billionaire businessman and reality show celebrity reflects the culture wars' persistence. Despite the contrast between the paltry policy specifics that he has offered and his crude boasts that by force of will he can upend Washington's dysfunctional ways and put the country back on track, Donald Trump continues to lead the Republican pack. Much of his support stems from revulsion among the grassroots to cultural elites in both major political parties.

Then there are the issues. Abortion, same-sex marriage, race relations, immigration, guns, and God divide much of the GOP base from the Democratic Party base. The fault lines, though, do not end there. These cultural issues, with the exception of guns, also disunite social conservatives and libertarians within the GOP.

Typically, conservatives are perceived to be on the defensive in the culture wars. Progressives, eager to accelerate innovation and consolidate change, are deemed to be playing offense. Yet having gained hegemonic control of universities, the mainstream media, and Hollywood, progressives have accumulated vast swaths of conquered territory to defend.

In "How to Be American" in the fall issue of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Eric Liu proposes a resolution to the culture wars. Executive director of the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program and founder of Citizen University, Liu argues that cultivating a shared "cultural core" should be as appealing to liberals as conservatives. Building on E.D. Hirsch's 1987 bestseller, *Cultural Literacy*, Liu contends that mastery of a common fund of knowledge central to the American experience would empower the poor, promote social justice and equality, and bind the nation together.

So it would. Which makes it all the more unfortunate that Liu encourages a sense of grievance among minorities and guilt among whites—and redefines our shared culture in a way that stokes partisan enmity while advancing the divisive conceit that only progressives truly embody the American spirit.

In his view, Hirsch was right to insist on the need for a list of “names, phrases, dates, and concepts that...‘every American should know.’” But Hirsch’s list did not overcome America’s legacy of “white supremacy” and “white-privilege denialism.” For a nation “as far-flung and entropic as ours,” the list must “be radically reimagined,” Liu writes. “If it isn’t drastically more inclusive and empowering, what takes the place of whiteness may not in fact be progress.”

Liu rightly emphasizes that cultural knowledge matters because even ordinary assertions only become intelligible against a background body of meaning and within an inherited framework of concepts. Literacy enables citizens to participate effectively in civic life.

But Liu wants to go beyond recovering an appreciation of America’s cultural inheritance. He wants to invent one. In “the new America, where people of color make up a numerical majority,” he argues, “the more serious challenge, for Americans new and old, is to make a common culture that’s greater than the sum of our increasingly diverse parts.”

Liu envisages a cultural literacy list that would “catalyze discussion and even debate.” It would be many-colored and inclusive, rich with references to movies and music, and to the ethnic, racial, and religious minorities that populate America. In the spirit of progressives’ “living Constitution,” it would be “an evolving document, amendable and ever subject to reinterpretation.”

The content of this list would demonstrate that “the essence of American life is that it relentlessly generates hybrids.” So would the method by which the list is produced. It would be “an online, crowd-sourced, organic document that never stops changing, whose entries are added or pruned, elevated or demoted, according to the wisdom of the network.” And it would teach that the story of “diversity and hybridity” is “the legitimate American story.” Serving as “the mirror for a new America,” Liu’s cultural literacy enterprise, he claims, would overcome the conflict between the claims of a common culture and multiculturalism by illustrating that multiculturalism “is our common culture.”

But multiculturalism is *not* our common culture. Nor is the essence of American life hybridity and diversity. It is the American commitment to individual freedom and equality under law that is fundamental, and which makes possible the bounteous American pluralism that Liu justly celebrates. At this moment of dizzying change, recovery and restoration of the enduring principles at the core of the American experiment in self-government is decidedly more urgent than construction of a document that echoes the clamor characteristic of contemporary public life.

Liu confuses a part of the American story for the whole. To be sure, any respectable list of cultural literacy today must reflect the richness of American popular culture. It must also feature women’s and nonwhite people’s contributions to the American experience as well as the injustices to which they have been subject. But it should not banish to the periphery what

is most basic to the American experience, what nourishes hybridity, and what enables Americans—amid diversity and disagreement—to forge their own futures while forming a single nation that remains the envy of the world.

Liu obscures this larger picture—call it the American constitutional tradition—in part, it seems, because he dislikes what a significant segment of fellow citizens do with their freedom. Liu’s disdain for conservatives repeatedly bubbles up. He treats the term “right-winger” as an obvious insult, and caricatures conservatism, which involves a disposition to respect tradition and seek prudent change, as an outlook that is “worshipful of tradition” and “hostile to change.”

Such cultural illiteracy is all too common and bound to perpetuate the culture wars. Perhaps it can propel a culture warrior skilled in demagoguery to a presidential nomination.

But because the country remains legitimately divided over hard issues and neither side can win merely by galvanizing its base, the candidate—Democrat or Republican—most capable of framing his or her message in light of the principles that undergird the American experiment in self-government will be best positioned, come November 2016, to assemble a victorious majority and, what’s more, promote the public interest.

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