Opinion
NCR Voices

A man demonstrates outside the New York Stock Exchange Oct. 13, 2008. Governments around the world committed hundreds of billions of dollars to rescue failing banks that day, sending stocks soaring and giving Wall Street its biggest one-day gain ever. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

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Friday, we began a review of James Davison Hunter's vitally important book *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* with a focus on his historical survey. I stopped with his provocative thesis that the marginalization of religion as a force in cultural politics begins with the close of the Civil War, but he continues his narrative, through Dewey and Niebuhr, the world wars, the Civil Rights Movement, etc. You'll need to get and read the book to access Hunter's fine historical sketch of the shifting cultural landscape.

Today, we'll finish the review by looking at the current moment, and the first thing to note is that Hunter does not turn away from the painful task of informing his reader that the situation is bleak.

In his 1991 book *Culture Wars*, Hunter explained that the deep cultural roots of American public life had diverged into two increasingly antagonistic worldviews, the one still informed by a biblical worldview and the other believing that the just society was one which maximized personal autonomy. In this new book, he writes, "conservative Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Orthodox and Conservative Jews, discovered that they now had more in common with each other than they did with liberal and progressive members of their own [faith] tradition." For Catholics, this represented a complete abandonment of a robust ecclesiology and an acceptance of the long-present American cultural norm of reducing religion to ethics. This was a prelude, a necessary precondition, for Catholic complicity in the intensification of the culture wars that began in the first decade of the 21st century.

Hunter proffers several reasons for that intensification, starting with the collapse of Communism, which robbed America of its "useful enemy," and source of negative solidarity. This was followed by the astoundingly rapid successes of the gay rights movement, "long the bete noir of Christian conservatives." The most significant agent of intensification, however, was the economic meltdown of 2008 in which "the objective conditions of middle-class life changed significantly." Hunter continues:

> Members of the highly-educated, professional upper-middle class were certainly surprised, even shaken, by the economic contraction. They experienced a paper loss in wealth from the drop in the markets, but relatively few were traumatized by its harshest effects — indeed, as the stock market reemerged and resumed its bullish ways in the subsequent decade, the prosperity of the professional and managerial class improved. Not so for those in the less well-educated, nonprofessional middle, lower middle and working class who, through unemployment, foreclosure, and the loss of opportunity took the full impact of the economic collapse on the chin.

Those who took it on the chin were made ripe for anyone's promise to make America great again — and they were not wrong to entertain the hope, even if they have fallen for a charlatan in seeking to achieve it.

A person holds New York Times newspapers at the printing plant in New York City May 30, following the announcement of the guilty verdict on former U.S. President Donald Trump's criminal trial, over charges that he falsified business records to

conceal money paid to silence adult film star Stormy Daniels in 2016. (OSV News/Reuters/Stephani Spindel)

A principal fallout of the culture wars and the 2008 recession was a profound transformation of the political landscape as "progressives have come to represent the privileged and the powerful." Hunter writes that "while conservatives and progressives have always spoken to different sectors of the American economy, their audiences reversed." Democrats did not represent the rich the way Republicans had. Democrats now were the rich and "the institutional carrier of progressive politics moved from labor unions to universities and its chief advocates shifted from working class liberals and socialists to middle- and upper-middle-class college students, professors, and administrators."

Hunter's account of these transformations in our sociocultural and political life are richer and more complex than I can summarize here. His commentary on the "therapeutic turn" of identity politics is important and brilliant, as is his argument that progressives "came to embrace bourgeois and economic values." And, he brings an equally critical eye to his examination of the transformations on the sociocultural and political right. He looks at a host of culture warrior avatars, including Richard Rorty, The Claremont Institute. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, all under the chapter heading "Exhaustion," which is the perfect word to describe these mostly flailing attempts to reignite the depleted cultural resources of our time.

I wish he had spent more time confronting and detailing the corrosive effects of deconstructionist theories which, as a friend says, "rob meaning" from our common life. Still, his critique is pointed and spot-on:

The ability of those theorists and philosophers to interrogate, doubt, and highlight the imperfections and hypocrisies of the social and political order was a luxury that they could enjoy only as long as the rest of the country did not. As long as a majority of Americans — even if some of them were "deplorable" or "clinging to their guns or religion" — continued to operate within the hybrid-Enlightenment and commit to the American project (including fighting its wars), there could be relative political stability. But now the skepticism of intellectuals has percolated into the general public. Now, nearly everyone is a skeptic, nearly everyone sees the hypocrisy, nearly everyone doubts the goodwill of their leaders — and that, it turns out, is one of the

keys to understanding the comprehensive epistemic crisis that is distinctive about our political moment.

I hope everyone will sit with that indictment long and hard. It cuts against both the left and the right, but especially against the left. Democracy needs those willing to debunk, to be sure, but there has always been something morally repugnant about those who blithely criticize and attack imperfections and hypocrisies of the society that has furnished them with so much wealth, social capital and freedom.

In this 2015 file photo, LGBTQ supporters wave a flag outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington. (OSV News/CNS archive/Tyler Orsburn)

You must buy and read the book to find how Hunter explains the "shrinking telos" of American public life, the evaporation of concern for the common weal, the diminishment of personhood in a bureaucratized and desacralized world, the crippling effects of identity politics, and much else. I could fill many pages with the dog-eared or underlined passages I marked as especially incisive.

It is the chapter entitled "Nihilism and Its Cultural Logics," however, that is most distinctive and important. Hunter notes that there may not be a lot of individual nihilists running around: It is difficult to live life without imparting value and meaning to the choices you make. Instead, he argues, it is the culture itself, which "has a life of its own more or less independent of people's intentions or will" that is nihilistic. So, "most Americans still believe in God or a higher power, yet our public culture is overwhelmingly and aggressively secular in character." There are echoes of Niebuhr here with which Catholics can't be entirely comfortable: While we have come to understand there is such a thing as social sin, it is never as distinct from individual sin as our Protestant brethren allow. In this case, too, it is not difficult to make the case that plenty of individuals at culture-forming institutions — the media, universities, politics — are afflicted with intellectual sloth and group-think that makes them individually complicit.

The argument in this chapter on nihilism is carefully made, and will be hugely controversial, so I am reluctant to summarize it for fear of abusing the important distinctions Hunter draws. But this is also the most original and important chapter in the book because he puts a name to a phenomenon people are reluctant to name, or even acknowledge. So, for example, he notes that "in the fluid and fragmented world we live in today, every identity group defines itself against some other group, the net effect of which is the destruction of common life." This negotiating of identities is what he calls the necessary "boundary work" of a culture.

Hunter writes, in our contemporary nihilistic culture, "such boundary work is called cancellation, doxing, scapegoating, and negation. These performative acts of purification betray a moral certainty that can be as severe, cruel, unforgiving, and authoritarian as any of the caricatures of the gray, gaunt, and graceless Puritan divines." But, how can these morally agitated zealots of left and right fit the definition of nihilism which is, explicitly, about abandoning moral valuation entirely? "An answer is that the nihilism that emanates from the death of God is passive, institutionalized with the broad fabric of society. … Moralism, whether in a reactionary or revolutionary bearing, is not a way of life but a weapon of coercion."

Hunter doesn't put it this way, but I will: The left-leaning Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has more in common with right-leaning Sen. J.D. Vance than either of them

has in common with Franklin Roosevelt or, for that matter, Richard Nixon, or even Joe Biden. The moralism of the left and the right are both now concerned less with the culture of liberal democracy than they are with enforcing their vision. You see this, too, in the declarations that the courts are "illegitimate" — the left raises the cry when *Roe* is overturned and the right raises it when Donald Trump is convicted.

This book is not a hopeful one. Hunter includes a "Coda" in which he sketches a few ideas about what it will take to revive the culture of democracy. It is a short chapter. I asked him if we needed not only a shared ethics but a shared cosmology. "None of this has traction until it is embedded in patterns of social, economic, and political life. … We need a revisioning of what liberal democracies can be," he told me. Hunter is exceedingly critical of the leadership class, especially in politics, which he told me was "entirely third-rate." No argument there.

How, then, do we hope against hope? He confesses in the book to being idealistic. "But that's the point: without ideal images of a better world, without myths of a completion of the past in the future, without a world ordered to goodness, truth and beauty — in short, without imaginaries of an inclusive, encompassing, even if tragic hope, we become creatures of mere impulse with few ambitions other than personal safety or pleasure or, perhaps beyond that, public power."

James Davison Hunter has done the culture a favor. This is a highly detailed and intelligent diagnosis of our cultural ills. Whether we will, or can, find sources of renewal is doubtful but not impossible. I can't help thinking that there is almost no way to achieve cultural health that does not pass through Catholic social teaching, especially our Christian anthropology. There is a book that needs to be written! In the meantime, I cannot recommend Hunter's book more strongly. It fearlessly, and profoundly, makes its case that the problems we face are deeper than the result of the November election, important though that is. The problems lie deep in our culture and it will take a lot of hard work to dig ourselves out of the mess we have made.

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