

Culture War

By Lee Congdon, Ph.D.

Summary

It was Richard Weaver who wrote, "Ideas have consequences."

Unfortunately, one need look no further than the influence of Antonio Gramsci on contemporary culture to know that Weaver was correct.

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To few Americans is Antonio Gramsci a familiar name. That is to be regretted because the work of the late Italian Marxist sheds much light on our time. It was he who first alerted fellow revolutionaries to the possibility that they would be able to complete the seizure of political power only after having achieved "cultural hegemony," or control of society's intellectual life by cultural means alone. His was an incremental, rather than an apocalyptic, revolution—the kind, that is, that we have been witnessing in the United States, and the Western world generally, since the 1960s. With this in mind, we ought not to treat the contemporary "culture war" lightly; the fate of what remains of civilized life may well be decided by its outcome.

Few Leftists now adhere strictly to the original tenets of Marxism, or even to those of Marxist Revisionism, but, what is every bit as dangerous, they, like Gramsci, often succumb to a temptation that appears to be irresistible to those who dream utopian dreams: the passion for negation that often shades into nihilism. Utopianism and nihilism may seem to be antithetical, but they are not; both derive from the same source—undying hatred of the world as it is.

Much of contemporary American culture has as its aim the trampling of moral and aesthetic standards that were once all but universally acknowledged, even when they were being violated. With few exceptions, contemporary movies, television shows, and popular music portray Judeo-Christian morality as laughable at best and tyrannical at worst. To hear them tell it, America is in danger of becoming a theocracy governed by the "Religious Right." This despite the fact that the reigning culture is pagan through and through. It therefore assumes casual or impersonal sex to be the norm; feeds the public's increasing appetite for sexual perversion; depicts all fictional tyrannies as "right wing"; and pollutes the public square with scatological language. Only in rare cases are the purveyors of this "culture" challenged; and then, like the egregious Howard Stern, they pose as persecuted defenders of free speech and command even more money. Almost no one—Judge Robert Bork is an honorable exception—has had the courage to make the case for censorship, in part because of the widespread, but utterly mistaken, belief that there exists a "right of free expression" that is absolute.

Another oft-repeated, but spurious, argument against censorship is that "you don't have to watch (or read or listen to) it." Others, however, do and even those who are not motivated thereby to commit crimes—think only of

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the Littleton, Colorado murderers—are coarsened by it and thus contribute to a further lowering of public taste, with what consequences for individual, often young, lives we have reason to know. Those who can endure a veritable torrent of linguistic vulgarity will find Tom Wolfe’s recent novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, instructive in this regard.

Following Gramsci, Leftists know that Christianity remains the greatest obstacle to their total victory in the culture war. “The civilized world had been thoroughly saturated with Christianity for 2000 years,” the Italian had written; something, he insisted, had to be done about that, and something has. The de-Christianizing of America and the West that he advocated is by now well underway. Inspired by the anti-Christian French Revolutionary calendar, publishers now insist upon the secular “B.C.E.” (Before the “Common Era”—whatever that means) rather than “B.C.” and “C.E.” (the Common Era) rather than “A.D.” Booksellers, popular magazines, and television treat with respect anti-Christian screeds such as *The DaVinci Code*. Courts, including the Supreme Court, declare most displays of the Decalogue to be “unconstitutional.” The media repeat the mantra according to which Islam is “the religion of peace” (daily evidence to the contrary notwithstanding), find nothing to criticize in Buddhism, and remain “non-judgmental” concerning scientology and other cults, while at the same time they portray Christianity as the religion of “crusaders,” bigots, and yahoos. Members of the Christian clergy have themselves joined in the relentless attack on orthodox Christianity.

Few thoughtful people deny that we are living in a time of decline. Judge Bork entitled one of his books *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*. Pat Buchanan recently published *The Death of the West*. The only question that remains is: Is the decline reversible? There are a few signs of hope, including the much commented upon challenge to the “mainstream” media presented by talk radio, bloggers, and Fox News. That is something, but not enough. Gramsci counseled his side to begin a “long march through the institutions,” by which he meant the capture of the cinema, theater, schools, universities, seminaries, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and courts. It is past time to begin a long march in a new and better direction.

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