

## BOOK REVIEW

## Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis

by James Davison Hunter

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024, 487pages

Conflict mediators report that presenting issues in a conflict are seldom the core issues of the conflict. Mediators learn to listen for clues that reveal the unstated stories that lie beneath the stories that the parties to the conflict are eager to talk about. Any resolution that does not address the deepest level of the conflict will probably not last, and when a resolution of the core issues is reached, presenting issues seem superficial.

Scores of recent books and articles about the current political turmoil in the U.S. reveal that scholars and pundits are as divided as the politicians and voters. *Democracy and Solidarity* offers a socio-historical analysis of the deeper issues that lie behind the controversies that divide us. Hunter focuses his analysis on the cultural antecedents and assumptions of both sides of the political divide (xv).

Hunter begins by separating surface culture (about which we are conscious) from implicit culture “which manifests itself as the unspoken rules, schemas, and resources that organize the overall forms of linguistic...expression and practice” (9,10). Implicit culture is often known only from inference. It gives us the frameworks of understanding, knowledge, and interpretation we take for granted in order to make sense of the realities of our daily lives. Hunter contends:

that the deep structures of culture provide an implicit view of the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge (how we come to know things), the nature of human persons with whom we live, the nature of our social obligations, and not least, the ends toward which meaningful individual and collective action is oriented. Every culture implicitly poses and addresses in various ways these proto-philosophical questions. (10)

American democracy was formed under particular cultural and historical circumstances. It came into existence after a period of frustration over seemingly never-ending conflict in Europe. The agreement that our founding fathers reached offered hope that the goals of justice, freedom, and equality could be achieved. A democracy rooted in individual freedom, human rights, and the separation of powers was the dawn of a new day.

At the birth of the USA, two cultural rivers were blending into one. The party of faith and the party of reason found enough common ground to formulate a plan for governing. Hunter calls the working agreement that they generated the “hybrid-Enlightenment.”

The Declaration of Independence states the principles and values to which we aspire, and the Constitution spells out the mechanisms of representative self-government. Our founding fathers did not “generate the concepts of justice, equality, equity, decency, civility, or the temperament to long for these things. These . . . came from a stratum of social thought far too deep to be influenced by the actions of politicians. (13)

Although he did not consider Blacks to be fully human, Thomas Jefferson could assert without fear of being contradicted by his fellow colonists that “all men were created equal; that they were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Despite real differences on the issue of slavery, there was sufficient agreement about a few basic religious beliefs: humans were created in God's image, they were all equal in God's eyes, and they should all treat each other with respect for their divinely bestowed dignity. These and other implicit assumptions were largely ignored in the US Constitution because the writers assumed these beliefs, values, and viewpoints would be sustained by the church, the family, and local communities in perpetuity.

The Constitution was created by men who accepted the Enlightenment's faith in the universal validity of reason and the power of humans to reshape nature through technology and economic enterprise. But they were also familiar with Christian views and values. Christians were aware of recent scientific advances and were attracted to the democratic and humanistic ideas stimulated by the Enlightenment. The result was a creative mixture of ideas out of which a rejuvenated political order emerged. It acquired sufficient affirmation by the majority of the colonists to inspire the loyalty and solidarity needed to forge a new nation.

However, the honeymoon did not last long. The history of the USA is like the story of the tribulations of a troubled marriage including an ongoing struggle over which principles and practices needed to be revived, and which needed to be reformulated or abandoned. During each of several conflicts in American history, disputants have proposed ways of reworking the hybrid-Enlightenment synthesis, and they have worked through their differences repeatedly to find a new functional agreement.

The bulk of Hunter's book examines the political history of the USA. Each chapter is about a specific time when the working synthesis of America's deeper cultural resources was strenuously challenged by conflict between competing factions of Americans. He shows in each episode how solidarity was strained before a new, deep, cultural synthesis emerged. He offers a series of examples of how democracy has survived its contradictions and failures when people worked through their differences. Examples of controversies include whether or not Blacks and

others were fully human, whether or not liberalism as a set of virtues that promote the common good can be blended with a set of economic goals that promote the maximization of self-interests (152), and whether or not a non-religious humanism is capable of supporting the formation and affirmation of the virtues of courage, truth-telling, justice, and self-restraint (178).

Public disputes such as abortion, race, police misconduct, immigration, climate change, and immunization are morally saturated. The failure of the American people to move in the direction of resolving these disputes after years of disputation suggests there may be a deeper problem. Hunter is clear:

Even if these truncated debates could be expanded to be made logically coherent, they would still find no mutually agreeable compromise or resolution because they trace back to premises that are, in the end, commensurable. (310)

Concepts such as justice, fairness, freedom, rights, equality, equity, tolerance, inclusion, hate, and the like are themselves contested and manipulable because they too are lifted out of the context of larger conceptual frameworks or traditions (311). Americans trust different moral sources such as reason, God, human nature, the pleasure/pain ratio, and social conventions. Therefore, moral discourse is bound to be frustrating, fractious, aggressive, and insulting. Without agreement about moral authority, discussion is not likely to help.

When people disagree about moral authority, they tend to rely on their own authority, and the problem with subjectivism (or emotivism) is that it is self-authorizing. If people are free to choose their own values and morals, they are also free to change their minds whenever they please. “Within emotivism, winning arguments is, crudely, about using moral language to incite emotional responses on others” (312).

The last four chapters are an analysis of the current unraveling of America's implicit culture. American political order is now fragmented and fractious. Social solidarity is riven by polarization, divisive digital technologies, stratospheric economic inequality, and social mistrust. The moral order has become less unified because of skepticism, subjectivism, and uncertainty. And for some, commitment to the dignity and worth of humans has become more fluid.

Furthermore, unresolved conflicts tend to escalate. Humans have an inherent tendency to consider self-interests before they consider the interests of others. As conflict escalates, issues proliferate, the benefit-of-the-doubt becomes blame, thinking moves from gray to black and white, communication moves from cautious to exaggerated, view of self moves from a mix of good and bad to an innocent victim, and the view of the other moves from mixed to totally bad. And tragically, the ultimate goal moves from problem-solving to winning.

Hunter is keenly aware that allowing an unresolved conflict to linger for too long is dangerous. It can lead to the exhaustion of some, and it can lead others to prefer an authoritarian leader who promises to restore order and pride. When grievances outweigh commonalities, and when established political authority is deemed illegitimate, authoritarian options become attractive to those who share grievances. Fascism tells an appealing story: it is a story of a nation in crisis because of enemies within, and only drastic action can reverse the downward slide. The ruler needs emergency authority to do whatever is necessary to avert a total collapse. Elections must be suspended, retaliation against political rivals is a necessary evil, information must be controlled, and rights must be canceled.

Incivility, extremism, and hyper-partisanship in America have now escalated to authoritarian challenges to our political norms, precedents, and structures. These include disregard for the rule of law, politicizing the judiciary, flouting the rules against using political power for personal gain, and the use of political power to punish enemies. With a president who disregards democratic safeguards, with social media that have little regard for truth, and with a culture riven with moral discord, social conflict should be expected, and effective governance should not be expected.

Unfortunately, but understandably, Hunter offers no solutions. He remains hopeful that enticing readers to intensely examine the deep, implicit sources of the current political morass; some creative, wise individuals will be prompted to suggest a new synthesis of the two original competing cultural streams.

I believe that Hunter is correct in arguing that procedural solutions, while necessary, are not sufficient. He is also correct in arguing that a remedy will depend on more than good will and smart public policy. His hope is based on his faith. His hope is that people will examine their deepest beliefs, values, and assumptions, perhaps prompted by his magnificent first step in that direction.

As a conflict mediator, I know that discussion about a solution before everyone involved is in agreement about the nature and scope of the problem introduces unnecessary friction and confusion. I have a clear process in mind before I begin to help the parties proceed through a series of steps intended to clarify, not overwhelm. More discussion about the future of democracy may prove useless. We must first agree as a culture about whether humans are exceptional, about the source of moral order, and about whether the purpose of life is to maximize self-interests, as well as other questions about the nature of reality.

The modern political order makes no pronouncements about what citizens should believe or how they should live, as long as they obey the laws. But the political order cannot survive without some cultural agreement among citizens about beliefs and values needed to provide the social cohesion required for social cooperation and collective self-government.

Beliefs and values such as personal responsibility, self-discipline, mutual respect, mutual aid, family stability, and neighborliness were widely shared in early American history. But gradual trends in the direction of increasing secularization, geographic mobility, economic dominance, pluralization, and instrumental rationality have diluted support for these values. Consequently, communal values have been supplanted by values such as self-expression, being true to oneself, individualism, and consumerism.

American democracy began as an inspiring synthesis between the party of reason and the party of faith. The contribution from the party of faith has been rehashed repeatedly throughout American history. Now the contribution from the party reason is under review. Through many iterations the initial agreement has been downgraded from a synthesis to mutual coexistence, to mutual suspicion. Hunter leaves the reader wondering about how much social solidarity is needed to prevent political order from collapsing into open conflict, about whether social order depends on moral order, and about whether moral order depends on some acceptance of some shared ideas about the nature of reality. He focuses the reader's attention on the real issues that are now at stake.

Dale DeWild  
Central College, Iowa