



CULTURE WARS AS A DICTATORSHIP OF FORM

by Ondřej Slačálek

Culture Wars Papers, no. 19, October 2022

Culture wars are often understood simply as the agenda of conservative forces. Much more frequently, however, they are conflicts with two sides. These two sides have differing compositions, agendas, and goals, and each considers itself to be a long way from the other. But the form of culture wars makes the sides closer than they would like to think.

Culture wars have a strange, shadowy existence. To write about them and label this or that conflict a “culture war” means somehow to participate. This is even more the case if one accepts the “sides” of these conflicts and their supposed permanent existence, or if one accepts their labels, the most common being “conservatives” and “liberals.” There is a strong degree of fluidity, however: the actors and their self-definition change. From an insider point of view, there are vast differences on both “sides,” if we even accept the existence of “sides.” From an external point of view, and even more from the point of view of the opposite side, the differences are not very important; the other side is often united in its hostility.

In this essay, I will try to characterize the form of culture wars by comparing it with the concept of moral panic. While in the case of moral panic there is a united and powerful society hunting minority “folk devils,” in the case of culture wars, society is split into two camps that struggle in more or less symmetrical conflict and to some extent mirror each other. In the next section, I will present three cases of such content mirroring: in images of decline, in revolutionary spirit (denied but present), and in the accentuation of identity shaped by the imaginary of the market. The final section will try to situate contemporary culture wars in space (semi-globalized U.S. metropolitan provincialism) and time (the era of individualism).

Symmetrically Produced Moral Panics

From the end of the 1960s, moral panic was an important concept of critical social analysis. The image of a population, led by its leaders and by “[moral entrepreneurs](#),” attacking an unpopular minority that the population considered to be a threat to basic moral values—and sometimes even to the existence of society—captured the Western imagination. The role of the “folk devil” identified and persecuted in moral panics was played by youth subcultures, racial or gender minorities, and various other groups.

From the early 1990s, the image of “moral panic” began to be questioned. According to [critics like Sarah Thornton and Angela McRobbie](#), folk devils “can and do fight back;” they may also find powerful liberal allies and protectors. But even after this criticism, the image of moral panics remained powerful, seeming to provide an adequate depiction of various societal anxieties present in the public debate. We are still preoccupied by many images of “folk devils,” and society struggles with the temptation to unite in their persecution in order to

restore its moral purity—or at least security. I think we can use this image as a point of departure to capture the most important aspects of culture wars as a form.

Standard depictions of moral panics, ranging from the works of [Stanley Cohen](#) to those of [Erich Goode and Nachman Ben Yehuda](#), highlight six basic traits of moral panics: attention, disproportionality, enmity, consensus, volatility, and exceptional measures.

Attention means united societal focus: strong media coverage supported by societal demand for even detailed aspects of the moral panic. Attention thus becomes self-sustaining, with moral panics reproducing themselves in a “spiral of amplification.” *Disproportionality* is connected with attention and is the most problematic part of moral panics, since it is very hard to say what proportion of information is adequate. To summarize, however, moral panics become newsworthy in themselves and give a prominent media presence to news that would not be interesting without them. *Enmity* is based on the idea that the object of the moral panic constitutes a danger—even an existential danger—to the moral order of the society. The attributes that explain the immorality and the position of existential threat become the key characteristic of the “composite image” of the enemy (Cohen), and the “folk devil” is stereotypically evoked with the use of a few characteristics that play a symbolic and explanatory role.

Consensus describes the relatively strong acceptance of a definition of a situation produced by a moral panic. Of course, developed modern liberal societies are never fully unified in their opinions, but at moments of moral panic even non-conformist actors often accept to some extent the definition of the situation and must either work within its limits or be constantly on the defensive ([Stuart Hall et al.](#) have shown this with regard to the position of the British left during moral panics related to ethnically coded violent crime). *Volatility* is derived from the fact that no society can live permanently in such a state of moral mobilization and anxiety. Moral panics become episodes that necessarily lose society’s attention eventually. Sometimes, *exceptional measures* are used—or at least called for—to end the moral panic. Moral panics either lead to social change or they vanish.

What are the differences between culture wars and moral panics? One is obvious: the element of *consensus* that is present in moral panics is absent in culture wars. If culture wars are wars in any sense of the word, then it is, above all, because they have [two opposite sides](#). These two sides may call the other side “hegemonic” and consider themselves “marginal” or “marginalized”—but this, too, is part of the conflict rhetoric. After all, the deep divisions in society make hegemony extremely hard to attain. There are places of power, yes, but without the deep depoliticized consent presupposed by the term “hegemony.” The prevalence of culture wars thus looks like confirmation of Christopher Lasch’s thesis about [“power after hegemony.”](#) An individual or group may attain power as “fact” but without the acceptance of their opponents. Some groups may successfully promote their definition of a situation, but even they typically face constant criticism, attacks, and attempts to dispute their claims and “facts.”

Instead of unity, we have a more or less symmetrical conflict between two sides. In this context, the element of *disproportionality* loses all purchase: even highly obscure topics (which regularly become the subject of culture wars) are made relevant by the simple fact of becoming the object of conflict—and thus a “symptom” of deeper societal divisions.

With regard to *volatility* and *attention*, the situation has definitively changed. Episodes are volatile, and changes in the media landscape, in particular, have changed the nature of attention: often, an intense culture war is present only in segmented publics and depends on a particular political intervention to ensure that the cultural conflict receives the attention of the mass media and a sizable part of society. The segmented nature of contemporary culture wars notwithstanding, they are not isolated episodes. They communicate between themselves and constitute chains of references and symbols. The topics change, but the sides are mostly

overlapping or the same, and together they comprise one constant culture war with many episodes of different intensity.

Enemies are evoked in stereotypical ways, with Cohenian composite images containing a few stereotypical characteristics. Given that culture wars are much more symmetrical than moral panics, contemporary “folk devils” are not on the margins of society. They are relatively symmetrical competitors in a struggle for power and influence in society, in a conflict over rules and over the infusing of the imaginary mainstream (which is increasingly becoming lost) with the values of the particular side. Actors who are seen as being both a moral and an existential threat to society (not necessarily for *doing* something, but simply for *being* “conservative bigots,” “racists” and “fascists” or “liberal commies,” “cultural Marxists” and “crazy feminists”) are evoked stereotypically using a few attributes, in a way that perfectly fits Cohen’s idea of a “composite image.” This level of enmity is reserved for somebody who was for a long time tolerated, for sides who share the space of a nation-state, civil society, and cultural infrastructure. Given this, *exceptional measures* are typically not available (so the awaited catharsis and resolution cannot come), but at the same time they look like the only adequate reaction. The spiral of amplification thus seems endless.

As such, contemporary Western societies live in a state of constant moral panics. These are relatively symmetrical and intense. With the transformation of the media landscape from the hegemony of huge mainstream producers dominating millions of “passive consumers” to “social media” featuring millions of co-producers, the volatility and intensity of these moral panics has reached a new level. The unclear position of the mainstream and the personalized nature of social media mean that almost anybody (from ordinary participants in public debates to state presidents) can consider themselves a persecuted minority, under pressure from the exclusive moral panic and “folk devil” hunting of the opposite side. This has been described by [Mark Fischer](#) in the case of the left, but it has become a common condition. At the same time, the informational space offers an almost infinite reservoir of cases of others’ “madness.” In such a context, coexistence can easily be conceived of as unbearable, yet there is no conceivable way out.

Mirroring or Parallels? Decline, Revolution, Identity

The opposing sides of culture wars have many substantial differences, but the shared form of the culture war brings them closer. To some extent, the form even inscribes itself into the contents. Both sides of culture wars place heavy emphasis on a vision of decline, and for both sides identity is the key topic. Can we find here imitative dynamics between enemies? The stimuli of war were depicted by [Carl von Clausewitz](#): “So long as I have not overthrown my opponent I am bound to fear he may overthrow me. Thus I am not in control: he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him.” We cannot provide evidence of mutual influence, but there is definitely similarity. We may identify it in three key elements of the discourse of both sides: the idea of decline (of the vitality of civilization, in the case of “conservatives,” or of civilizational standards, in the case of “liberals”), self-denied revolutionary spirit (against the establishment and its institutions, in the case of “conservatives,” and for the basic transformation of important societal norms, in the case of “liberals”), and a market-shaped concept of identity.

The focus on both decline and identity is, of course, characteristic of the “right-wing,” “national conservative” side of the culture wars. The over-used images of the “decline and fall” of ancient Rome are telling, especially in their focus on “moral decadence” and their omission of the fact that the Rome was an empire, unjust and tyrannical toward its subaltern parts. It is relatively simple to identify the elements of the declinist narrative on the conservative side: it is an image of the “good old normal world” of an understandable order and meanings destroyed by the liberal monster machine of new rights, contexts, and concerns. Deeper in this vision of decline is nostalgia for the world of industrial modernity, which may be retrospectively evoked as a space of order, clear

relationships, and hierarchies (even if, during its golden age, this world was itself seen by conservative authors as the destruction of the earlier and supposedly idyllic world of rural stability, hierarchy, and order).

These conservatives call for a “return” to the “normal world”—but in fact, they do not have anywhere to return to. As Polish philosopher [Jan Sowa](#) has said in the context of the Polish PiS (but he could have been talking about Orbán, Trump, Johnson, and others), they are not conservatives, because they do not conserve established institutions. Indeed, they mobilize against them and try to destroy them. Whether they accept it or not, they are revolutionaries.

The opposite side of the conflict, often labelled “progressivist,” looks as if it is not declinist. But its goals and activity have a revolutionary nature that is often denied or misunderstood by proponents. While they (as a feminist, I should say “we”) relatively successfully promote revolutionary change in key institutions of Western society (family) and destabilize key and intimately experienced human roles (gender), they simultaneously pretend that this represents nothing more than an application of basic liberal principles (like equality), which cannot have any legitimate opponents. This revolution pretends not to be a revolution; it is a self-denying revolution. This is one of the reasons why progressives not only do not accept their opponents, but also do not understand them.

In spite of its progressivist nature, the liberal camp has its own vision of decline. Its most influential form is rhetoric about a “post-truth” or “post-factual” society. The basic element of the rhetoric is declinist: a world that does not accept “facts” as “truth” has lost an important civilizational standard that ruled in the recent past. This mutual interchangeability between “truth” and “fact” not only reduces the universalist and pluralist possibilities of the term “truth” (as something that is present in various ways in the life of any individual and can be expressed in various ways, including works of art or popular proverbs) to simple primitive empiricism. It also makes sure that it is connected with the privileged position of the educated classes, able to know or produce facts.

An obsession with identity is, on the “conservative” side, clearly connected with the image of decline. Be it Trump promising to make the US great *again*, Johnson promising the rebirth of Albion, or Orbán promising to save Hungarian ethnicity from the EU melting pot, conservatives claim fall and promise recovery. The image of fall is connected with a clear image of market competition among nations. In this imaginary, competition between nations is taken for granted and considered necessary and legitimate. Identity is mostly derived from a memory of an unchallenged privileged position in the global hierarchy—and from contemporary anxieties at the loss of this privilege.

The question of identity is also present on the opposite side, where the identity of groups is largely understood in terms of oppression. It is this oppression that legitimizes group identity: no oppression, no (truly valuable) identity. This causes some obvious problems, but there is also a more surprising issue: the market-influenced imagination is relatively clearly visible, especially in the concept of “cultural appropriation.” While the motives for this rhetoric are mostly understandable, and the power imbalances that it shows are real, the rhetoric is based on a presupposition that culture can and should be understood as exclusive property (in this case, of some particular groups). The paradoxical left-wing embrace of the absolutization of proprietary entitlements is based on disputable anthropology (as is mostly true of most of the market imaginary). It is hard to imagine a world of autochthonous cultures that do not influence one other—and could thus “belong” to somebody and be defended from being “appropriated.” The imagination of such a world mirrors the conservative imagination of strong national states: it is an imagination of clear borders that can restore our control exactly at the moment when we are confronted with a strong feeling of complete loss of control over the circumstances of our lives.

Individualized Revolt against an Individualized World

Discourses about decline and identity are semi-global. They permeate the whole Western world with a day-to-day intensity and with a simultaneity in agenda and terms that is probably unprecedented. Due to the dominance of English as a lingua franca and the Anglo-American cultural and media infrastructure, the dominant symbols and references are mostly American. Even for Central European conservatives, the U.S. “neo-Marxist” campuses are one of the most important sources of Western decline. Meanwhile, for Central European feminist or anti-racist movements, U.S. definitions of problems and proposed solutions are of such key importance that they often transfer them to their local debates not only without contextualization, but even without translation.

The Czech-Italian philosopher [Václav Bělohradský](#) spoke of two kinds of provincialism. The provincialism of the provinces is clearly visible, and so it is easy to see and criticize it. The provincialism of metropolises, however, is often hidden; the metropolitan self-centered focus on parochial fashions can easily be obscured by the wealth and power of metropolises. Thus, he believes, “metropolitan provincialism” is much more dangerous than the provincialism of provinces.

The age of semi-globalized culture wars is an age of semi-globalized U.S. metropolitan provincialism. It is semi-globalized because its global reach is mostly limited to the West. It is metropolitan provincialism because it poses local U.S. standards as a paradigm, a source of metrics and rhetoric for the whole world. U.S.-centric public culture, however, does not have adequate means of accepting inputs from other parts of the West, especially from the smaller national cultures of southern and eastern (but also northern) Europe.

The semiglobal circulation of U.S. “metropolitan provincialism” as a product evokes images of conflict between local polity and global usurpation. Polish feminist scholars and activists [Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk](#) have published a brilliant analysis of how this game works on the conservative side: feminism (“gender ideology”) is always presented as global, while conservative criticism thereof is always understood as local and grassroots resistance. Graff and Korolczuk show very vividly the manipulative nature of this discourse: for one thing, it overlooks the transnational nature of anti-feminist lobbies (be they pro-life moments, networks like Agenda Europe, or, most importantly, the majority of powerholders in the Catholic Church). It also denies the existence of locally rooted and grassroots feminist activism.

But this strange game of delegitimizing opposing views by attributing them to “alien” and “foreign” forces is far from confined to the conservative side. We can find a mirror image of it in the framing of conservative opposition (and especially its racist and anti-feminist moments) as a product of “Russian propaganda” or even “Russian agents,” the weapons and fighters of a “Russian hybrid war.” Part of the political generation termed by Czech political theorist [Pavel Barša](#) “89ers” uses this explanation not only to make these ideas nothing but the artificial result of foreign interference, but also to renew the relevance of the Cold War imaginary. Yet this image is not limited to this generation. Polish feminist writer [Klementyna Suchanow depicts](#) global anti-feminist networks funded by the Kremlin. This image definitely captures some important aspects of reality, but it obscures the real fear: what if the anti-liberal, racist and sexist reaction is *not* mainly a product of foreign propaganda, but instead has a strong “authentic,” grassroots, and homegrown element, reflecting domestic troubles and contradictions?

This shared suspicion of alien forces intervening in our lives in a decisive way reflects a crisis of power in contemporary Western societies. The bankruptcy of state socialism and horrible stories of the misuse of state power for mass terror have reactualized for the end of the twentieth century the classical topic of liberalism: the defense of the individual against misuse of power. The rise of globalization, economic crises since 2007, rising environmentalist anxiety, and migration crises have changed the prevailing mindset. Regardless of political ideology, most people in the West are probably more afraid of the *impotence* of the powerful and their inability to act and solve crises than of their *omnipotence* and the threat of the misuse of power.

To mobilize collective power and overcome this impotence, shared legitimacy is needed. While both sides of culture wars work with collective (id)entities, we have seen how permeated they are by the market imaginary, which is individualist in its basis. [Gergely Csányi and Eszter Kováts](#) have shown how even the contemporary left-wing emancipatory concept of intersectionality, proposed as a way of overcoming the politics of identity and individualism, has ended in the individualist situating his/her/their own privilege or disadvantage as a filling-in of Excel spreadsheets. [Václav Bělohradský](#) once called “depoliticized individualism” a “totalitarian ideology”—meaning, above all, that we cannot escape it. It has permeated not only political ideologies and cultural contents, but also the technical infrastructure of our culture, from TV to social media. Individualism exists and we all co-create it, just as citizens living under socialism co-produced the “regime,” in the analysis of Czech dissident [Václav Havel](#). Havel was able to mobilize some aspects of human individuality against the totalizing pressure of the post-totalitarian apparatus of state socialism. But are there any elements of human sociality that can be used to challenge the totality of depoliticized individualism?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The opposite sides of culture wars are definitely not morally and politically equal. Nevertheless, mutual interaction means that they are caught in a single form that transforms them into something they did not want to be. Maybe this is one of the reasons for the culture war *nausea* declared by many of their actors: let’s give up the culture wars and talk about something real! This feeling is often expressed by voices on both sides. Sometimes it sounds and works like an alibi, but we can recognize behind it a strong feeling of people caught in a dead end. Yet as we know from Freud, to escape from a “lowly” and humiliating position is not easy. By trying to escape culture wars rapidly and completely, we may end up making them even stronger. Maybe what we need to do now is Freudian work: to understand in which form we speak and act, how funny we are during it—and then try to change it, not to escape it.

Trying to find a short route to escaping culture wars mostly means engaging in nostalgic dreams about a world “before” that had clear landmarks enabling orientation—whether nation, democracy, or class. As Václav Bělohradský warns, this makes us “goofus birds of democracy” (Bělohradský borrows “goofus bird” from Borges’ *Zoologia fantastica*, which depicted a bird with its eyes looking back to describe the approach of going back to possibilities that have already been lost.) “Goofus birds of democracy” end mostly in “demophobia,” bemoaning “the people,” who have supposedly misappropriated democratic values. In his book [Time of Plethocracy. When Parts Are Larger than the Whole and the Weltgeist Has Fallen from Its Horse](#) (2021), Bělohradský calls for hope to be placed in new, unstable, and somehow chaotic forms of creating active minorities or temporary majorities that are “post-catechetical,” as no catechism of any ideology can represent them. According to him, this new form of politics is reality, and in spite of all its problems, it also brings about the possibility of overcoming the power of various oligarchies and adequately reacting to the conditions of the anthropocene, which implies the radical politicization of everything.

In this context, the questions posed by culture wars are real and we cannot escape them. They concern the emancipation of oppressed minorities but also resonate with the anxieties of “silent majorities” (whatever this means and whether or not they are real “majorities”—for the most part probably not). We cannot jump through them to some “reality outside.” Indeed, a Brechtian “electing a different people” would be required.

Still, this should not be cause for resignation. When [Graff and Korolczuk](#) discussed how to react to anti-gender panic in Poland, instead of direct engagement with it, they gave priority to activities that could unite people from various milieus and create overlapping consensus and new, surprising alliances around such topics as the situation of single mothers. They did not overcome the panic, but they at least reframed some questions. In the context of culture wars, we need this kind of imagination. Maybe, in such struggles and ideas, we can recognize a slow way to escape the culture wars and rebuild society from its individualist and identitarian ruins.

Ondřej Slačálek works in the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. He edited the volumes [Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism](#) (with Pavel Barša and Zora Hesová) and [The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 Years into the “Transition”: New Left Perspectives from the Region](#) (with Ágnes Gagyi).