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At the Crossroad of Crisis and Hope

Toward the Renewal of Civilization: Political Order and Culture

edited by T. William Boxx and Gary M. Quinlivan.

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The words “civilization” and “culture” have long been problematic terms. When they first began to be used regularly in the eighteenth century, they were opposed to each other. Civilization suggested a universal human achievement, usually associated with the rationalist claims of the French Enlightenment. Resisters to these seemingly abstract and alien principles, primarily the German Romantics, preferred *Kultur*, the traditional communities and values of the German people. But before long, certain French figures like DeMaistre were also objecting that civilization and the French Revolution were foreign to the culture of the French people. Tensions between the universal and the particular have been with us ever since.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, this already troubled relationship took a turn for the worse. Today, it is rare to see a public defense of the very notion of civilization. Except for a few curmudgeonly conservatives, it is now taken for granted that there is no common human nature, no set of universal moral principles, no defensible reason to judge one state of life as more “civilized” than another. “Culture” has fared little better. The

old proponents of culture thought in terms of national groups. All that has now been obliterated with the rise of multiculturalism, which mocks national culture but vehemently—if self-contradictorily—asserts the value of various ethnic, racial, class-based, or gendered “cultures.” All cultures are equal, except for the formerly dominant culture of the West and the United States. In the new dispensation, there shall be no dominants and dominated, no center and periphery. The one agreed upon principle of evaluation is that there is no overarching principle of evaluation.

The very title of this powerful collection, then, challenges several reigning assumptions. Based on papers presented at Saint Vincent College’s Center for Economic Policy in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which in recent years has won awards for the high-level debates and publications it sponsors, these essays provide both wide-ranging analyses of what has gone wrong and some potent recommendations for how to set it all right.

Charles R. Kesler, a political theorist at

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Claremont McKenna College, contributes a penetrating commentary on how the American Founders viewed the relationship between our political order and culture. In his view, their innovation—separation of church and state—implied several things about the American regime. First, government would of necessity be limited, since it had been denied authority over the highest things. Civil society would be the realm in which, emancipated from state control, Americans could fulfill duties conscientiously. The problem, however, is that, “The independence and dignity of civil society depended...on its ability to remain ‘civil.’”

The Founders knew that if citizens were not self-controlled or were corrupted into turning the realm of private freedom into the mere pursuit of money and pleasure, self-government might become impossible. In such conditions, as Madison observed, “nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.” Following Madison further, Kesler argues that the way we should recover a better relationship between politics and culture is to think like the Founders, indeed to think of ourselves as re-founders. For as we become re-acquainted with the structure of the American system and its articulation into different spheres, we will also become more aware of the prerequisites for a decent public order. One result would be to bar the Left’s cultural impositions through governmental fiat. But another would be that those conservatives who think government should be used as an instrument to reform culture will see the threat to our constitutional order in the attempt and the basic impossibility, therefore, of a good outcome.

Hilton Kramer, Joyce A. Little, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Robert P. George, Martha Bayles, and Dinesh D’Souza, among other writers, provide fulsome ac-

counts of the breakdown that has occurred in the culture in general, and in religion, male-female relationships, marriage, the arts, and American pluralism. In spite of their different subjects, all are agreed that, as Kramer puts it, “the gravest political issues confronting our societies are no longer susceptible to purely political solutions.” Kramer points to several still-available achievements of the West’s high culture that need to be retrieved before they disappear entirely. That retrieval will help us towards the renewal of civilization.

Bayles argues that retrieving great cultural works may make censoring the obvious filth and ugliness of much popular and elite culture unnecessary because it will restore the power of “old-fashioned cultural authority.” We have been suffering, she argues, from a confusion between two meanings of “culture” (in addition to the ones mentioned above). Culture may be used to refer to the perfecting of a specific human activity, which is therefore “cultivated.” This meaning exists in every “culture.” Indian sitar players, African drummers, and Mayan sculptors all have their standards of better and worse in their given fields. These are as clear as the difference between the performances of the Three Tenors and the rest of us trying to sing an operatic aria in the shower. But this evaluative dimension of culture has been all but eclipsed by an anthropological approach which views all cultures from a value-neutral standpoint. However useful as a research tool, this stance is simply inadequate for choices we need to make in a fully human life. For Bayles, recovering distinctions of better and worse will lessen the need for dangerous government inclinations towards censorship: properly introduced to the truly great, most people will naturally forsake the trivial or the corrupt.

But the most vexed cultural questions at present have to do with sex. At first sight, it

is not a good sign that most people today would be unwilling to say publicly that there are essential differences, differences that might make a difference in our common life, between men and women. For instance, feminists often seem to believe that female liberation is primarily liberation from men, family, and children. Actual women, however, often regard having and nurturing children as one of life's greatest satisfactions—and liberation from a workplace which is not all fun and games. Taken together, the feminist ideology and female inclinations have led to a legitimization of motherhood outside of marriage and the widespread breakdown of the family. We have seen various proposals to respond to this crisis. Fox-Genovese allows that these proposals have some validity, but "they all avoid the real problem: marriage as the essential social unit." Professionalized care-givers or Hillary Clinton's "village," she notes, cannot take the place of mothers and fathers, however much current social policy seeks to turn teachers, social workers, police, and others into substitute parents. Like the illusion that divorce does not adversely harm children, belief that "it takes a village" draws a false plausibility from our hope that we may be as selfish as we want to be without consequences for those connected to us.

Robert P. George argues that an even deeper problem is that those of us who believe in traditional marriage have been brainwashed to think that the state has no business preferring one "lifestyle" over another. Hence the widespread passivity over the growing movement for "gay marriage," which is a logical consequence of some of the currents Fox-Genovese also outlined. George notes that the view that various lifestyles are of no importance to the state is itself a moral judgment and therefore is not "neutral," but an illusion of neutrality. Such

a position was not self-evidently neutral in the past. Marriage was not thought to be so fluid a concept, untethered to biology and higher human purposes, that it could easily be redefined and the partners altered at will. George's whole essay, which is too technical to summarize here, must be read in its entirety; it is the most powerful philosophical restatement of the traditional bases for marriage—as the union of one man and one woman—to appear in years.

In an essay distilling decades of research and wise reflection, historian Stephen J. Tonsor reminds us that we should not think of our situation as unprecedented: "Cultural crisis is a natural condition of all human cultures." This realization will not lessen our concern over the present, but it will help us to see that similar moments have been dealt with effectively in the past. Tonsor agrees with Arnold Toynbee that the self-consciously imaginative work of creative minorities, not the elites and masses frequently spoken of, is what historically has moved the world: "The work of culture and the creation of enduring institutions are the realization of visions and dreams of relatively small creative elites who by inspiration project a future worthy of imitation (mimesis)." We may feel that we lack such great figures in our time, but Tonsor points to the work of Adenauer and Monnet in restoring Europe, the conservative intellectual movement in America after World War II, the Chicago School of Economics, the peaceful revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, and finally to John Paul II and the traditional Christian groups, Catholic and Protestant, currently engaged in spiritual renewal.

One of the many strengths of *Toward the Renewal of Civilization* is that, amid all the well-known causes for pessimism, it identifies and recommends lesser-known reasons why we may still have hope.