The horrifying right to one’s own context

Seven rules of culture warfare

Ondřej Slačálek
22 October 2021

Anybody can become a cultural warrior, even unwillingly. With common grounds diminishing and liberals and conservatives dead-set against each other, is the Left doomed to fail?

‘Culture wars’ has become a rather annoying expression, encompassing far too much while explaining far too little. At the same time, it seems to be an annoyance we can hardly avoid – and not only because the value-based political arguments that tend to fall under this umbrella term tend to draw our attention remarkably easily. It is also because conflicts of this kind seem to have replaced the traditional disputes between the right and the left.

When this situation occurred in the 2000s in Poland, where the conflict between liberals and conservatives temporarily nearly erased the left, many people offered mocking comments and chose to view it as a local peculiarity, a symptom of a historical malady, combined with the strong influence of the Catholic Church. In the end, however, Poland turned out to be more of an avant-garde. Even the Czech PM Babiš, who had long pretended to be ‘the healthy middle way’, eventually understood it might be more useful for him to label his arch-enemies, the Pirate Party, as ‘neo-Marxist’, holler about his ‘friend Orbán’, and fight against migrants and for a higher Czech birth rate.

Where to search for the roots of the contemporary culture wars? As far back as at the end of the 1970s, the recently demised sociologist Ronald Inglehart spoke of a ‘silent revolution’ – a shift in the wealthy Western societies towards ‘post-material values’: towards an interest in the quality of life, as well as, among other things, championing the rights of various minorities.

In the early 1990s, Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi responded with an article about a ‘silent counter-revolution’. The story of the shift towards ‘post-material values’ emphasizes only one side of the debate, but when it comes to real politics, it always takes two to tango.
If promoting liberal values and the emancipation of minorities become key political issues, the opposing opinion camp is going to rise in importance as well. Besides, if the ‘post-material values’ are a concern only for people who no longer have any serious material problems, it provides their rivals with an excellent opportunity to articulate economic frustration where it is going to hurt the economically privileged the most: on issues which they chose as the flagships of their moral and value superiority, and which made it into the mainstream at a time when a major part of society was losing stability. The collapse of the world of long-term jobs, predictable careers, and growth came hand in hand with the reconsideration of many values.

In the 1990s, to posit the competition between the ‘silent revolution’ and the ‘silent counter-revolution’ as the principal political struggle of tomorrow seemed perhaps a little far-fetched. After all, the political scene at the time was dominated by long-established parties, and the Greens, as well as the far-right, huddled in the margins. However: a couple of decades rushed by, and the political maps changed beyond recognition.

In 2016, for instance, Austria saw a tight presidential battle between two outsider parties, one Green, and one from the far-right Freedom Party. A year later in France, the far-right Marine Le Pen ran for the presidential office against the eventually victorious Macron, a liberal technocrat who benefited from the fact that he stood outside the French partisan system.

To understand the profundity of the change, it might be useful to try and sketch its outlines by formulating seven general rules.

#1: The shrinking of the ‘normal world’

‘Normality’ is becoming politicized – and is, at the same time, disappearing.

In culture wars, politics adopts as its object something that had long been evading the traditionally demarcated sphere of the political. Religion, poems in children’s books, reproductive rights – these all used to be preconditions of politics, as well as under the influence of politics; but at the same time, the liberal approach had been forcing them out of politics.

The restricted interpretation of politics as the management of ‘public assets’ banished religion, culture, and sexuality into the sphere of the private – however inconsistently and unsuccessfully. But the truth is, the ‘public’ was political as well: under the veil of ‘personal issues’, a number of inequalities, discrimination, and other unacceptable issues thrived, and there seemed to be no other way than to politicize them, which turned out to have various unexpected consequences.
In culture wars, both sides like to refer to self-evident sources of ‘the truth’ – such that ‘every sensible person must surely be able to recognize’. But such pre-political wells of wisdom seem to be drying out, and the formerly reliable solid ground is being replaced by quicksand. The side which pursues the further expansion of rights calls for generally accepted liberal principles. This side views it as ‘a matter of common sense’ that it is not fair for some people to be able to enter into marriage, while others cannot. The side which would, in turn, like to curb the further expansion of rights keeps referring to the ‘normal world as we all know it’.

Both claims, however, are losing credibility. Social changes inspired by anti-racism, feminism, and the LGBT+ movement may be seen as applications of the liberal norms of equality, but ones so far-reaching that they are actually changing the contours of the world as we know it, as well as institutions that have, in one form or another, existed for thousands of years.

The liberals are right in saying that, once we adopt as our point of reference the fairly moderate belief that all people are equal and should not be discriminated against based on their race, sex, or sexual orientation, we can hardly hold any objections to marriage for all, gender equality, and the eradication of hate speech from the media. Their conservative opponents, on the other hand, are right in saying that the changes under discussion are a path toward a far-reaching transformation of the world, a true social revolution, and that it is impossible to unleash a revolution and make it seem like we are merely applying already accepted principles.

Every revolution must be ready for a reaction; and a revolution that adorned its flag with the emancipation of the despised needs to have at least some empathy for its opponents, especially those who are in a marginal position themselves. Otherwise, it will disprove itself and create fresh swarms of the ostracized.

If it is unconvincing to present a substantial change of society as a mere application of already adopted norms of equality, it is just as unconvincing to call for the return of the ‘normal world’. When exactly was that? Czechs would say, in the nineties: today’s dominant generation was young then, with historically unprecedented opportunities opening up for them. Brighter observers (including members of the said generation with more developed self-reflexive abilities) would argue, however, that there was, in fact, barely anything normal about the nineties, and the unprecedented opportunities are clear proof of that. In the USA, as in many other countries, the ‘normal world’ seems to date back to before a major part of industry moved to Asia, particularly China. For national conservatives, normal was the semi-mythical era of strong nation states. Some Christian conservatives place normality in the time when churches held more influence.

One thing is clear, though. The ‘normal world’ is steadily shrinking – and not just because it is a nostalgic construct. If ‘normality’ becomes a weapon that both parties use against one another, it can hardly be shared. If the ‘normal world’, ‘nation’, ‘family’, or the church, for instance, become objects of political struggle, they lose the currency of normalcy that their champions relied on in the first place. And if, on the level of values, we share less and less, we are also capable of producing less and less ‘normality’.

#2: The transformations of the seeming winners
Politics is morphing into a duel between liberals and conservatives. But what are liberals and conservatives morphing into?

Do I keep mentioning liberals and conservatives? Well, it is these two groups whose conflicts have allegedly torn politics in two, and who constitute the rivals in key political battles. The rest of us have to choose which side we stand on, even if we would prefer to not choose at all.

Conservatives often argue that liberals are not really liberals, and instead of fighting for the freedom of each and every individual, they just keep inventing more and more rights for more and more groups of people. Champions of the freedom of speech have become the bearers of political correctness.

In part, this is an Americanization of the discourse and a transposing of meanings from across the Atlantic. But there is also a deeper paradox at play: the transformation of liberals into defenders of group rights reflects the realization that without group rights, the rights of many individuals are purely illusory. Enforcing norms of political correctness (as far as it is real, not just a conservative fantasy), in turn, reflects the realization that no communication can exist without norms – a lesson that should not be lost on conservatives.

In transitional situations, new norms are created, although often clumsily, and with a great deal of exaggeration and pressure. Even the reaction to this exaggeration and pressure, however, needs to be integrated into the process of the transformation and evolution of new norms – this process must not rigidify (as is sometimes the case). We also cannot pretend that the process is not necessary, and that we can live in a society whose spheres, in part, are governed purely by Freedom, Equality, Property and Česká soda – a cult Czech TV satire from the nineties.

But like liberals, conservatives have undergone a transformation, too. No longer do they stand for the circumspect defenders of the status quo, carefully pondering the adequacy of different innovations, always looking and never leaping. Conservatives became revolutionaries who paranoically unmask the victorious advancement of various anti-civilization trends that have already seized control over western society and made it a place that is hostile, deteriorating, and apparently beyond salvation.

The revolutionary pathos of angry men, whose world is falling apart in front of their very eyes, has changed conservatives past the point of recognition. Prudence was supplanted by radicalism, conservation by looking for a new order. American conservatives mostly came to recognize this difference once confronted with Trump. His was not the conservatism they knew, but something else: a demagogical ideology of resentment and aggression. Not even they, however, were able to resist the power of that ideology, and they eventually simply adjusted to it, despite knowing and seeing that this ‘conservativism’ did not mean respect to traditional institutions, but rather boundless partisanship, disdain for rules and election results alike, and crowds of deranged followers of conspiracy theories in the building of the Congress.

#3: The age of moral entrepreneurs
When politics becomes the extension of morals, anyone can be a politician.

Culture wars brought into politics a double paradox. If politics was supposed to be a sphere at least partially separate from morals, just like the public from the personal, in culture wars, both somehow managed to mingle.

If the political match points are marriage for all, abortion, or even a provocative theatre play, then not only the content and character of politics have changed, but to a large extent, also the cast.

Almost anyone can become an important political player – a charismatic preacher, an Islamophobic entomologist, a writer prophesying the end of civilization, a feminist blogger. Many of these see their political role as a noble mission; they are activists or organizers, lobbyists or professional moral entrepreneurs. Measured by the ability to ‘live politics’ and ‘live on politics’, they do not fall too far behind professional politicians.

Lawyers known from the Czech Alliance for Family, or, on a much more massive scale, from the Polish Ordo Iuris, are fully professional fighters for their cause. What sets them apart is primarily that, for the most part, they are not overly interested in either political posts or society as a whole – they mainly only follow several issues of their own choice.

But one can also become a politician unintentionally, even unwillingly. Amid a ‘culture war’, the content of individual value battles is often unpredictable. Amid a controversy which is currently aflame in society, or rather, on social media (or its specific segment), it is easy to become a fighter – by banning an exhibition of nudes for feminist reasons, by not banning it in the end, by making a movie, or perhaps by a completely random statement.

Culture wars have the potential to politicize the words of a semi-famous doctor, a conflict among football players, a Facebook post. All these are important to both feuding camps not in themselves, but as symbols of struggle for whichever principle is currently at stake. While Lautréamont, the predecessor of the surrealists, believed that times would come when everybody would be a poet, times have come when everybody can be a politician – often randomly, without expecting or wanting it.

#4: A battle of phantasms

We are witnessing a fight of two monsters. Both exist, but are not of equal weight.

Each side of culture wars is nourished mostly by the image of the other. Both sides are motivated by an image of a monster they are allegedly facing. And both monsters are a phantasm to the same extent to which they are a description of reality.

The monster living in conservative heads has multiple forms. The most ridiculous of them is the idea of a great neo-Marxist conspiracy which, aiming to disrupt Western civilization, seized its key institutions (a vision bearing far too much affinity to the Nazi obsession with conspiracy and ‘cultural Marxism’). Another vilifying version is slightly more apposite: the image of the liberal pole of culture wars as an unrooting and unstoppable machine spilling more and more new rights, a means of the emancipation of more and more groups who are coming to recognize their hitherto ignored oppression.

Conservatives imagine a world hollowed out with an excavator designed for universal liberation, unsightly and barren, devoid of familiar points of orientation and coherence; a world in which we will live isolated by the fear of causing microaggressions... It is a caricature blown way out of proportion, but even a crooked mirror has a way of reflecting reality.

The prominent liberal phantasm depicting conservatives is obviously their Nazification: fascism and multitudes of new Hitlers. To see one’s opponents as a reincarnation of the worst historical evil means promoting the significance of one’s struggle. On the other hand – especially in Western countries with a functioning system of social taboos - it can serve as a means of forcing the enemy beyond the zone of the acceptable. There are two catches, though.

Firstly, to classify every homophobe, xenophobe and sexist as fascist means expanding fascism’s scope, as well as ignoring that it represented only one of the many forms of authoritarianism and intolerance. As historian Holly Case remarks, historical fascisms had in common disrespect for life, determination to fight and win, to massively shed one’s own, as well as other people’s blood, in the name of one’s presumed greatness. Today’s nationalists, by contrast, are not too eager to wage wars. Like Nietzsche’s last men, they cower in front of their screens, and perhaps they would let people die remotely, maybe. To adequately describe the current forms of nationalist aggression and xenophobia, it will not suffice to simply review historical costumes.

The other catch is that by constant activization, the anti-fascist taboo of Western societies gets worn out. If we scream, Watch out, fascists! too often, we slowly normalize the notion of fascism in our society.

#5: Think globally, tweet locally

The key context is decontextualization.

Phantasms exist, however, and not only in the opponents’ heads. They can easily materialize; in the age of ‘communication abundance’ and ‘identity panic’ (Václav Bělohradský), nothing requires less effort than proving that our rival has finally gone completely crazy. We are, for instance, far enough from the world of American and British universities to use them as examples of utter insanity.

There is always something bizarre to pick up and utilize as a confirmation of the overall ‘insanity of the declining West’. A seemingly petty piece of news can become an international sensation, such as when a student club in Great Britain decided they did not
want a portrait of the Queen in their clubhouse anymore.

The past several decades have sometimes been described as a period of ‘multiple crises’. The most prominent factors are a partial economical globalization and, to a certain extent, also cultural and political globalization. These overlap with a profound transformation of the media, its seeming decentralization and individualization enabled by an unprecedented centralization on a handful of platforms. Add to that a crisis of the so-far existing forms of politics, linked to the conflict between the ‘winners and losers of globalization’. Culture wars have asserted themselves amid these factors as the fundamental principle of division.

The key to an intelligent assessment of a given state of affairs used to lie in seeing information in an adequate context. Nowadays, however, there are situations in which the very concept of adequate context falls apart, making even the most well-educated people seem like morons. Information travels across contexts, and it is not clear at all which of them is the adequate one.

Contexts serve chiefly as affirmations of pre-conceived phantasms, assembled in predetermined patterns: for instance, in accordance with the image of American universities gone crazy, declining Western civilization, the fascization of the masses, and Russian trolls who are to blame for every single liberal failure. Social media has an immense potential to de- and recontextualize, and if anything like a permanent imprint of postmodern philosophy exists, it is the right that it never explicitly formulated: the horrifying right to one’s own context.

Some culture wars are based on the transfer of different contexts across locations. The key figures of the liberal opinion camp are often what could be called Kulturträgers: people who bring the correct emancipation approaches from the centre (such as Anglo-American universities) into underdeveloped places. They often do it without trying to lead a dialogue, guided by their sense of superiority over the ‘merely local’, sometimes manifested by diction swarming with English expressions.

In the conservative camp, in turn, battles are staged as the defense of ‘the local’ against external pressures. As sociologists Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk show, in conservative discourse, gender is framed as ‘the Ebola from Brussels’, and always as a global phenomenon. Resistance to feminism is depicted as the defense of local traditions, even though it is orchestrated by global networks including the Catholic Church, the Russian secret services, and American Evangelicals.

#6: The inevitable defeat of the left?

To use Václav Havel’s phrasing, the left is currently experiencing ‘increased difficulty of concentration’.

For the left, the age of culture wars becomes a trap. It’s not that traditional socioeconomic issues are disappearing; it is rather that amid the battle between liberals
and conservatives, they tend to pop up somewhat blurry, or in an unexpected form: such as when poor people vote for the conservatives, ‘against their class interest’, just to retaliate against the liberals for their moral complacency.

The left is under fire from two different directions: should it stand up for human rights together with liberals, or for social cohesion and solidarity together with conservatives? Either way, the left quickly loses persuasiveness. If it used to be characterized by its proximity to the working class, and therefore also a certain proud vulgarity and anti-establishment appeal, it now seems to be losing both of these attributes to the far-right.

A left that defends the rights of the oppressed together with liberals is in danger of coming too close to the elite. A ‘liberal left’ that forgets the importance of the workers’ conditions for the currently sexier battle against sexism and racism, as well as a ‘conservative socialism’, recently so busily promoted in the Czech Republic, are just two names for the left losing the culture wars.

The rhetoric of culture wars in itself becomes a pretext for not taking part in the fight: We are not going to get involved in a pointless culture war, are we… But such an attitude ignores the fact that in the unfortunate language of culture wars, the key conflicts of our time are being articulated, such that may be bypassed only with permanent damage to one’s credibility.

**#7 One size fits all**

*Culture wars can easily become a Midas.*

Remember the mythical Greek king who was able to turn everything into gold with a single touch? The dynamic of culture wars seems to possess the same ability. Along the already established battlefronts, more issues can easily be distributed, including those originally uninvolved in culture wars.

opnamedatum 03-05-2011.

Disputes over corruption or conflicts of interest can easily turn into a clash between ‘the better’, or ‘the better-educated’, against the ignorant masses who do not hold the right values, cannot make reasonable decisions, and do not really care, as by supporting an allegedly or actually corrupt candidate, they just want to piss off the liberal middle classes who lecture them on democratic values while showing zero empathy for their problems.

Even some of the arguments about the Covid-19 restrictions morphed into a culture war. At first, it seemed the shared experience could help us overcome controversies and open up a sensible discussion about measures, their consequences, and who should pay for them. In the end, however, the debate started to revolve around an irreconcilable value argument over trust in science and scientists, closely connected to the fight of the virtuous liberals, diligently observing good hygiene, versus the less enlightened masses, supposedly prone to believe nonsense (and often more affected by the pandemic measures).
The collapse into a culture war also looms over an issue which perhaps has the potential to overcome the culture war logic: the argument about the climate crisis, and other key environmental issues that stand in its shadow, not getting enough attention. This conflict is by its nature even more ‘material’ and less ‘cultural’ than the fight over higher wages, and yet it finds itself in danger of being reduced to a battle of phantasms: on the one hand, images of ‘crazy Greta’, ‘eco-terrorists’, and protesters determined to ‘destroy civilization’ and ‘damage our industry’. On the other, a technocratic appeal to trust science, the idea that we need a technical solution which takes into account renewable energy sources and electric cars, and the urge to tame the unenlightened masses (coincidentally those who will not be able to afford electric cars).

Culture wars present us with an unflattering mirror: whether we take part in them or not, they can easily make us seem either pathetic or buck-passing. But here is the question: why should the image be more flattering than that anyway?

*This essay has been written in cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Prague and published in Czech in the A2 magazine on 10 September 2021.*

**Published 22 October 2021**

Original in **English**
Translation by **Alžběta Ambrožová**
First published in **A2 (Czech), Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (English)**
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/the-horrifying-right-to-ones-own-context/)
© Ondřej Slačálek / A2 / Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung /