

# It's not the culture, stupid

## Interpreting the US election

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**E**lections first and foremost decide governments, but they are also conjunctures when political forces are organized and realigned. The very act of mobilizing activists or energizing groups within the franchise can have long-term effects, and in the course of a campaign ideologies that have been kicking around for years may find themselves worked into new shapes and prised into new constellations. Gramsci pointed to certain elections as defining moments in the political life of a nation; and, if we believe the hype, the 2004 election should be seen as the most important American political event for decades. Maybe it was, though now that we know the result we might hope it wasn't. But its significance in the longer term will depend not only on the numbers of the day but also on the way in which the results are understood.

If the initial reaction is anything to go by, the pro-Kerry forces are aiming to lose the peace as decisively as they lost the war. According to commentary in the press, the results show us how deeply divided the United States has become. 'Not since the Civil war', Simon Schama reported, 'has the fault line between [America's] two halves been so glaringly clear, nor the chasm between its two cultures so starkly unbridgeable.'<sup>1</sup> Close elections can indicate a degree of popular consensus, but in this case the narrowness of Bush's margin seems only to underscore the severity of the split. For the torn halves of the United States – one secular, cosmopolitan, 'liberal'; the other evangelical, chauvinistic, conservative – are so distant from one another in world-view, yet so evenly balanced numerically, it is hard to see how they can coexist within a single nation.

That this analysis has penetrated popular consciousness receives confirmation of sorts in the numerous anecdotes and websites that have sprung up around the plight of the losers, some of whom have decided that coexistence is really not possible. Their strategies for escape include unifying the Kerry-voting states with more social-democratic Canada (see map opposite), emigration (columnists in the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times* claim to have been besieged by US friends looking for employment in the United States of Europe), and 'marrying out' of the country (see the unholy alliance of sexual ardour, social-democratic politics and commercial acuity embodied in the Canadian 'Marry an American' website). The Sunday following the debacle, the *Observer* carried an article describing the fate of New Yorkers, 75 per cent of whom 'may have never met a Republican' (despite having elected two of them as mayor in succession), and now find themselves trapped in a society that detests the city they live in and everything they believe it stands for.<sup>2</sup>

For New York defines one side of this divide, the contours of which are strictly geographical. Because American citizens vote for members of an electoral college on a winner-takes-all basis in each state, the results can be represented as a contrast between the 'blue states' that vote Democrat, and the 'red' ones that vote Republican. (Is there a more telling instance of American 'exceptionalism'? Where else would red represent

the more conservative party?) With the deindustrialization of large swathes of America and the movement of population westwards, the map has acquired a certain consistency in recent years: the middle and South of the country (a large expanse, but not densely populated) has been red; the West Coast, the Northeast and the northern, industrial part of the midwest, blue.

### Guns, gays and abortion

In the 1950s and 1960s Middle America was a class; now it appears it is literally the middle of America. Readers in Britain know that geographical splits, like the one between North and South, are often ciphers for class difference. But the now habitual contrast between red-state Middle America and the blue-tinted East and West coasts is not, on the face of it, about wealth and poverty, or whether your work is manual or managerial. The inner core of America defines itself in cultural terms – of its lifestyle, its ‘values’, its religious conviction and its position on three crucial issues: gay marriage, abortion and gun control. And its antithesis is therefore not the capitalist class, but a ‘liberal elite’ defined by its contrasting lifestyle, its food and leisure (the consumption of café latte being a particularly damning marker), its secularism, and its different position

on those same three issues, which, according to conservative wisdom, displays a unique mixture of moral relativism and belief in an intrusive state. Of course, the members of this liberal elite do, in fact, specialize in particular lines of work: in the world of the right-wing imaginary, they are typically professionals, people who earn their living by credentialled, and highly resented, expertise. But in the culture wars it is not work that counts, and it is not economic issues that mark the dividing lines. It is culture that drives politics.

This ideology has a long, disreputable history: it began, arguably, with Richard Nixon’s evocation of a ‘silent majority’ of decent citizens supporting

his efforts to slaughter as many Vietnamese citizens as possible. In his brilliant, funny and shrewd book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Thomas Frank has shown how US backlash conservatism systematically promoted ‘culture’ over economics as an area of political concern, to win support from working- and lower-middle-class constituencies that were bound to suffer from Republican economic policy. As Frank points out, ‘leaders of the backlash may talk Christ, but they walk corporate’.<sup>3</sup> Their political lines in the sand refer to sources of cultural anxiety (changes in family structure, sexuality, the mass media) that they know cannot be dealt with legislatively and which therefore can be relied upon time and again to motivate voters to defy their class interests:

The trick never ages; the illusion never wears off. *Vote* to stop abortion; *receive* a rollback in capital gains taxes. *Vote* to make our country strong again; *receive* deindustrialization. *Vote* to screw those politically correct college professors; *receive* electricity deregulation. *Vote* to get government off our backs; *receive* conglomeration and monopoly everywhere from media to meatpacking.<sup>4</sup>

From all the available evidence, the trick worked again in 2004. Although issues like abortion and gun control motivate only a minority of voters, in a nation which depends so much on demobilized (and often brutally disenfranchised) citizens, a minority that turns out to vote can make a big difference. And true to form, Bush has, despite the campaign rhetoric of moral values and the scenes of devotion, placed



business legislation at the top of his agenda and barely given gay marriage a second thought (though a new chief justice, with influence on abortion law, is high on his agenda). What is striking, though, is that now the anti-Bush brigade and the American centre-Left are *also* talking about American society in terms of provincialism versus metropolitanism, faith versus Enlightenment, a nation split by attitudes and ‘values’.

Given the depth of loathing each side apparently has for the other, it is surprising that the country is not on the brink of a political crisis, or that armed conflict has not broken out. Surprising until you realize that all the talk of cultural abysses and attitudinal chasms masks a striking consensus of political belief and lifestyle.

### **Capitalism and religion**

If you attended church more than once a week, you were far more likely to vote Bush than Kerry, but on most political questions you shared a lot of common ground with your heathen brethren. Both sides believed in a very mild form of social democracy, focused on universally available programmes like Medicaid, pensions and public education (although some of the churchgoers have some interesting educational projects of their own). Both seemed to believe something called globalization was an inevitable, modernizing behemoth that we all had to adjust to. Both expected, almost as their right, a wide variety of consumer goods and a standard of living high by international standards (the important thing isn’t whether they drive Volvos or pickup trucks: it’s that they all buy cars, lots of them). Both sides have recourse to the language of rights when they feel their private lives are being interfered with. Finally, both sides believe in God.

Do they? Given the prominence of ‘faith’ as a signifier of the Right in both the campaign and afterwards, it is worth bearing in mind that recent polls show that around 90 per cent of all Americans (at least all Americans who respond to polls) profess belief in God. This ought to tell us that ‘belief in God’ is itself a wide category, with no straight political trade-off or consequence. It’s worth remembering that the civil rights movement was led in large part by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, that churches and church leaders remain crucial to that movement, that Quakers and Quaker groups were central to the anti-war movement of the 1960s, and that the states with the highest Catholic populations (Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York) are, with one exception, the most reliably Democratic.

Too many commentators take professions of faith on faith, as if opposition to every cultural initiative since the 1960s was *motivated* by belief in a higher being. It’s far more likely that what scares the ‘cultural Right’ is the erosion of the familial-sexual myths that were central to their sense of self and their notions of fulfilment (and, despite the rhetoric, opposition to abortion is about sex, not the unborn child), and that ‘God’ provides a symbolic resource in this struggle. Thirty years ago Habermas suggested that while capitalist states could possibly steer their societies away from open economic crisis, the operation of capitalist economies together with formal bureaucratic administration would gradually destroy the traditional world-views on which bourgeois society depended. Unable by its very logic to create ‘meaning’, the state would have to hope that ‘the fiscally siphoned off resource “value” [could] take the place of the scanty resource “meaning”.’<sup>5</sup> In 1973 Habermas could not have predicted that ‘value’ (in terms of a rising standard of living powered by higher wages and greater benefits) would itself become a scarce resource even in the USA, leaving the door open for a renewed attempt to frame a religion suitable for advanced capitalism.

Habermas’s predictions call attention to a weakness in the strategy recommended by social-democratic analysts like Thomas Frank. They, quite reasonably, demand that the Democratic Party re-address its working-class base and focus on the kinds of economic policy and welfare state provision their constituency needs and deserves. But not only is there not enough ‘value’ to do this as effectively as in the period after World War

II, there is good reason to believe the working population wants ‘meaning’ as well. The post-1945 boom was accompanied by all manner of ideology and narrative bent on ensuring that working- and middle-class Americans felt not only more prosperous, but fulfilled as well, deserving of their prosperity, embodying tales of upward mobility with socio-cultural resonance. Kerry’s social-democratic promises are rather thin by comparison and, to Americans who are just getting by but are not impoverished, they may lack the moral lustre of earlier campaigns. (Clinton, although ruthless in his destruction of welfare provision and in his devotion to capitalist free trade, understood this intertwining of the moral, the aesthetic and the economic.)

Promises of prosperity, unmoored from a vision of fulfilment or moral argument, can seem dangerously close to the hedonism the moral majorities claim to abhor. Frank notes that the liberalism that haunts the imagination of fevered conservatives is nothing other than the liberalism of Hollywood and the culture industry, where glamorous fun-loving youth perpetually defy authority figures with moral scruples.<sup>6</sup> Kerry rarely made his economic case in other than utilitarian terms, afraid even to evoke the spectre of social justice as justification for a change in economic policy: tax cuts for the wealthy were condemned for being unnecessary rather than pernicious. Unwilling to make the egalitarian case, he more or less ensured moral values would be presented as the repression of what seemed like hedonism.

Habermas’s case, framed by his polemic with the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, implied that the destruction of traditional world-views was part of the functioning of capitalism itself, a ‘cultural contradiction of capitalism’. This hyper-systemic view of the matter forgets that cultural systems are often struggled over, made and destroyed. Were not the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s bent on the destruction of malevolent traditions and inspired by the prospect of new systems of meaning? One reason for the success of backlash conservatism is that it has managed to portray the advance of gay and women’s rights as the unleashing of hedonism rather than the construction of a new moral and cultural universe. And, to be honest, the Left has often allowed itself to be painted into this corner, evoking the language of rights as if what was at stake was merely self-expression or the opening up of a new market niche.

At the heart of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (civil rights, gay and women’s liberation, the Green movement, CND, the various autonomous Marxisms) lay new understandings of the range of exploitation and the futures that could lay beyond it. Despite the hard work of many, these were not synthesized with the concerns and values of the existing labour movement. Since that time, a succession of defeats have put labour on the back foot and have often reduced the claims of new movements to an equal share in American middle-class fantasy (exemplified in television shows *Sex and the City* and *Will and Grace*). The Democratic Party has a lot to answer for in this decline, and you could say with plenty of justification that, in lacking a new moral vision, it is reaping the whirlwind. The worst thing it could do now, however, is to buy into the very culture wars that the Right is anxious to sell. There is plenty of bitterness abroad, but its source is not really a dispute about marriage. It stems from a long history of betrayal, and opportunities missed over and over again. To that extent, the culture warriors are right: it all goes back to the 1960s.

## Notes

1. Simon Schama, ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, *Guardian*, G2, 5 November 2004.
2. Gaby Wood, ‘Those New York Blues’, *Observer*, 7 November 2004.
3. Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Henry Holt, New York, 2004, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Heinemann, London, 1976, p. 73.
6. Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* pp. 240–41.