

Culture Politics

by Marshall L. DeRosa

"The results of political changes are hardly ever those which their friends hope for or their foes fear."

—T.H. Huxley

**The Southern Tradition:
The Achievement and Limitations
of an American Conservatism**
by Eugene D. Genovese
Cambridge: Harvard University Press;
138 pp., \$22.50

**The Southern Front: History
and Politics in the Cultural War**
by Eugene D. Genovese
Columbia: University of Missouri Press;
320 pp., \$29.95



In political circles, it has become fashionable to talk about "culture wars." The discussions usually touch on the issues of abortion, euthanasia, sexual orientation, school prayer, gun control, and welfare, among others. These are issues that campaign consultants can use to polarize the electorate in attempts to maximize support for their clients and minimize support for their clients' opponents. The only casualties are the defeated candidates, and as for fatalities, well, it's just not that sort of war. Even the nonpoliticos, the activists who yell at each other from opposite sides of the street, are doing just that, yelling and not shooting each other. When an activist does break the rules of engagement and actually commits a violent act which results in someone getting hurt or killed, the perpetrator is punished accordingly.

The phrase *culture war* is a misnomer; *culture politics* is more descriptive, highlighting the push to control the policy-making processes. Indeed, these are con-

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H. Ward Sterett

tests, and there is a correlation between the winners in these political contests and the *pace* of cultural development. However, I am not convinced that electing Bob Dole will significantly alter the *direction* of cultural development, as opposed to reelecting Bill Clinton. In both instances, cultural decline will proceed along the same lines, albeit at different speeds.

To arrest or, more significantly, to change the direction of cultural development would, indeed, require warlike actions, and this is why Professor Genovese's two most recent books are essential reading for those of us who take our politics seriously. Genovese cautions us not to take lightly the significance of the political and cultural developments that are currently unfolding; they reveal tumors in the American body politic that could prove to be fatal. However, we must be careful not to kill the patient to cure the disease.

Genovese provides a unique diagnosis of what ails our culture. Having fought against traditional American culture most of his professional life—he makes no bones about being a longtime Marxist supporter of the Soviet Union and being an atheist—he has come to the realization that humanity's best hopes lie in recasting traditional values to address contemporary problems, especially traditional tenets of Americans' religiousness. He admits that

The empirical investigations disturbed a historian with the biases of an atheist and a historical materialist who had always assumed, however mindlessly, that religion should be understood as no more than a corrosive ideology at the service of ruling classes. If, at the beginning someone would have told me that religion would emerge as a positive force in my book—indeed, as the centerpiece—I would have laughed and referred him to a psychiatrist. In the end, the evidence proved overwhelming, and I had to eat my biases, although not my Marxism.

Here is the key to understanding Genovese's theoretical impulses. He acknowledges the value of religion, but a religion along the lines of the Socratic noble lie, an instrumental religion to be utilized in the quest for arresting the decline of American culture. Under his model, religion would be in the service of a newly established ruling class, providing solid ground "on which to stand in a persistent struggle to reconcile the claims of social justice, individual freedom, and a respect for human dignity in an age in which the moral as well as intellectual foundations of the requisite social consensus have crumbled." Hence, religion provides the "ethical and moral baselines" that historical Marxism "dis-

missed with indifference, not to say contempt."

At this point, a few qualifications are in order. First, Genovese should not be dismissed as a defeated Marxist looking for new weapons of destruction to use against capitalism. Genovese's analysis is much too profound for such simplistic reductionism. Second, his analyses of what ails higher education, race relations, denominational religion, and other elements of American culture are first-rate and insightful. And third, he has correctly acknowledged the historical primacy of Christianity in the establishment of a humane social order.

Genovese sees debilitating decline, spurred on in large measure by "a self-revolutionizing capitalist system and its attendant marketplace mentality [both of which have been the] greatest solvent of traditional values." The juxtaposition of traditional Christian values with finance capitalism, he argues, will reverse "the moral corruption that now runs rife in America," but the corruption cannot be "arrested without the intervention of government at all levels." The capitalistic system and its offspring, the national and international conglomerates, are not intentionally seeking to destroy traditional values; the marketplace mentality simply feels "no responsibility for the solution of such problems unless the problems interfere with business." Presumably, if innovative public policy could make such irresponsible behavior "interfere with business," the end result could be a marketplace mentality with a conscience. A big "if," to say the least, especially in light of the fact that the activists on the left have a conscience and do seek to shove traditional values out of the way in order to construct a social order congruent with their egalitarian dreams. Moreover, the marketplace mentality has been very amenable to the left's policy agenda, because that agenda "constitutes a field for economic exploitation." Big business is good business, and the left has big—that is, national—plans.

Herein lies Genovese's affinity for conservative Southerners. First, conservative Southerners have historically distrusted centralized power, political and economic. Because leftists are using both to reshape America's cultural landscape, Southern conservatives are their natural enemies. Second, we find in the South elements of that old-styled reli-

gion, from which traditional values can be nurtured and promoted. And third, conservative Southerners will not shy away from using the force of government, preferably local, to protect their traditional social arrangements against ideological and economic national and transnational onslaughts. This in essence is the *southern front*—conservative Southerners defending their community rights. For conservative Southerners, the happiness of the individual is integrally linked with the viability of the community; a community that transcends time and includes not only the rights and welfare of the living, but the rights of ancestors and posterity too. In other words, a community willing to make sacrifices for the long haul. Centralization is anathema to this model, because community autonomy, whatever its policy preferences within the parameters of civilized standards, takes precedence over national uniformity. Genovese observes that this type of conservatism insists "that all communities must be allowed their prejudices and discriminations; that the state must take full account of human depravity; and that respect for the inviolability of the human personality—a concept rooted in Christianity—must not be confused with the endless assertion of individual political and social rights against the collective exigencies of the community."

If taken at face value, Genovese's depiction of Southern conservatism has problems: How many in the South adhere to traditional conservatism, and in what manner and to what extent has society held together by economic ties replaced community held together by common blood, religion, language, and history? Even if communities did predominate over societies, how could a regional conservatism be made to influence politics at the national level? As a result, he acknowledges that the loss of republican virtue at the national, state, and local levels may necessitate a measure of neonationalism. Understanding his almost casual reference to neonationalism is the key to comprehending the "alternate program" for which he searches.

Here and there he provides us with glimpses of neonationalism: "In general political terms, the Communists saw, before anyone else except an occasional prophet like Du Bois, that no effort to effect a deep structural transformation in American society or to challenge Ameri-

can Imperialism could rise in the United States without a great upsurge of the black liberation movement"; "The struggles of black people have had a double aspect throughout the course of American history—as distinct struggles for black liberation and as an integral part of the struggle of the American people." Religious faith has been instrumental in the struggles of black Americans in their quest for liberation: "While much went into the making of the heroic black struggle for survival under extreme adversity, nothing loomed so large as the religious faith of the slaves." Genovese sees the politically useful application of religion for upcoming "struggles for liberation," that is, liberation from the debilitating social and economic policy agenda of the left and the marketplace mentality, respectively.

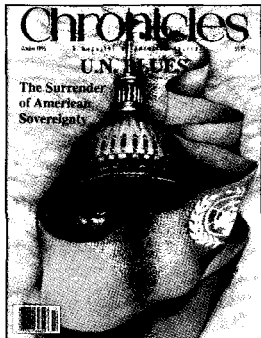
How is this utilitarian view of religion to be put into operation? Genovese is not shy about the scale of the changes that are requisite to success: "World-historic events compel a reassessment of first principles as well as social and political policies" in the "challenge to construct a decent social order." Is he suggesting that we subject America to the sort of vanguard reformers who inevitably do more harm than good? Moreover, the primary reason that the Southern tradition is so vital to American conservatism today is its resistance to such "restructuring"; and to the extent that its resistance has been broken down by national reformers (especially by Supreme Court Justices), it has ceased to be uniquely conservative.

Genovese makes clear his support for

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"legislation to curb the moral degeneracy of our times" and the "need for measured repression." However, he fails to articulate the source of such legislation and repression. He discusses the black community's reasonable demand for political autonomy, so that "they would have the power to deal with antisocials in their own way." But how is this demand by a minority to be self-governing, however measured, to be squared with a territorial democracy? Furthermore, what are the procedural safeguards for the constitutional rights of blacks and whites who are deemed to be "antisocial"? Is Genovese suggesting that we scrap constitutional federalism, popular control, and rights, which the Constitution was designed to secure? Perhaps. He claims that a hegemonic elite will always be with us. The trick is to form a new coalition of elites who are determined and able to arrest America's decline. Only a programmatic unity of this sort "holds out the main hope for a radical change

in our national fortunes." As a case in point, Genovese challenges us to "devise property relations that can sustain a social bond . . . strong enough to repress both personal license and totalitarian tendencies . . . to devise a creative system that combines social and private property ownership and renders it politically responsible." Good intentions, perhaps, which pave the road to a totalitarian American hell.

The Southern tradition has much to offer: most significantly, the advice to comply with the original nomocratic Constitution, not a telocratic one through which elites have license to function as social engineers in their quest for utopia. For the 21st century, Genovese would be well advised to focus debate on opening channels of true political participation (which might include restricting the franchise), splitting governmental functions within the context of federalism (a reinvigorated states' rights program), and instituting a separa-

tion of powers within the two levels of government (stripping state and federal bureaucracies of their administrative law powers), to name a few. The Framers' "original intentions" were to make the governments—state and national—accountable to the governed. The problem is not a lack of government, but *too much* government, at all levels. Yes, there will be winners and losers in this scheme, but to have only winners is a contradiction in terms. And if all else fails, we can be grateful that the Framers of the original Constitution were wise enough to provide us with the most nomocratic of constitutional provisions, the Second Amendment. The potential of a *cultural war* that leads men to exercise their Second Amendment rights is what makes Professor Genovese's latest two books so important. He has certainly diagnosed the disease plaguing the body politic; the question remains whether his tentative cure is worse than the disease.

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The Edinburgh Brute

by Theodore Pappas

"The whole Sherlock Holmes saga is a triumphant illustration of art's supremacy over life."

—Christopher Morley

The Oxford Sherlock Holmes:
A Study in Scarlet
The Sign of the Four
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes
The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes
The Hound of the Baskervilles
The Return of Sherlock Holmes
The Valley of Fear
His Last Bow
The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes
General Editor, Owen Dudley Edwards
Oxford: Oxford University Press;
\$99.95

It was the spring of 1893, and Arthur Conan Doyle was plotting murder. "I am in the middle of the last Holmes story," Doyle wrote to his mother, "after which the gentleman vanishes, never to return. I am weary of his name." Six years earlier, Doyle was an unknown young doctor in Southsea struggling to make ends meet. He had created Sherlock Holmes to while away the time, to earn a bit of money, and to hone his writing skills for more "serious" literature, meaning historical fiction written in the fashion of his idol, Sir Walter Scott. Two novellas, 24 short stories, and six years later, Doyle is famous, and toward the beak-nosed, hawk-faced, thinking machine that had brought him riches and international acclaim, he can feel only disgust. "I feel towards him as I do towards *pâté de foie gras*, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day."

This cavalier dismissal of one of the most enduring characters in modern fiction did not wash well with the English-reading public. For if "the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is



only a stage, and that the players are only players," as Samuel Johnson argued about the work of Shakespeare, the very opposite was true regarding Sherlock Holmes and his audience. "He became a part of my life," confessed Max Beerbohm, "and will never, I suppose, be utterly dislodged." "The Sign of Four . . . I read first at the age of ten," said Graham Greene, and it "has never faded from my memory." For when "we talk of [Holmes]," explained T.S. Eliot, "we invariably fall into the fancy of his existence." Nor has this "fancy" ever waned. Thousands of Holmesian societies exist

worldwide, the Far East included; and the Abbey National bank, which currently occupies Holmes's famous address, has reportedly hired a secretary just to handle the thousands of letters the character receives each year.

Perhaps channelsurfers and cybersexers will find it hard to understand how a literary figure could be so keenly imagined and deftly drawn that he virtually takes on a flesh-and-blood reality. Addicted to the visual image and unmoved by the written word, they can hardly conceive of the pandemonium that ensued when the Christmas 1893 issue of the *Strand* hit the newsstands announcing the sleuth's final adventure and demise. Women appeared in public wearing mourning apparel and men wore black bands around their arms and hats; offices closed, flags flew at half-mast, and newspapers ran obituaries for the man who never lived; the Prince of Wales was unhappy and the Queen "not amused"; some 20,000 of the *Strand*'s readers immediately canceled their subscriptions; and tens of thousands more sent Doyle angry letters and telegrams. The curt message of one reader seemingly spoke for the entire English-speaking world: "You brute!"

Owen Dudley Edwards, a professor of history at the University of Edinburgh, has spent a lifetime studying this Edinburgh-born "brute." As general editor of this collection, he has assembled the foremost scholars on Holmes, composed the general preface to the collection, and written introductions to three of the volumes, *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Valley of Fear*, and *His Last Bow*. Fortunately, his fine general introduction is reproduced in each volume, along with a detailed chronology of Doyle's life, a bibliography of his work (non-Holmes stories included), and a short essay on the principal studies of Doyle's career, so that each volume can stand alone as a complete

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