Essay 2, Chapter 2: "Power and Politics in American Culture"

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Classical sociology believed that trad. societies held together because of common beliefs, while modern societies held together because of socio-economic interdependence. But more recent findings show that modern societies also need common beliefs and myths.

But what happens when the consensus disintegrates? When beliefs and myths are no longer common? What holds societies together then? In a phrase, political coercion. The state is looked to as an arbiter to enforce a particular party's vision of that society.

In other words, in societies that lack consensus, everything becomes political. This is proven "by the fact that the amount of law that exists in any society is always inversely related to the coherence and stability of its common culture: law increases as cultural consensus decreases." (102) It's not that many lawyers are bad for society, but a sign of its decay.

This means that everything in society is defined and legitimated vis-a-vis the state and the rights it grants to opposing groups. Even the market is regulated by the states. Everything filters thru the state, and that changes the public imagination.

#Hunter: "The language of politics (and political economy) comes to frame progressively more of our understanding of our common life, our public purposes, and ourselves individually and collectively." (103)

As cultural consensus thins, groups (left and right) turn to politics to enforce their vision of society. But because politicization per se gives so little content to that process, competing ideologies arise to try to give that content.

From another perspective, this means that the view of liberal democracy which claims neutrality for the state is wrong. #Hunter: "This is wrong mainly bc it is impossible. Law infers a moral judgment; policy implies a worldview. Indeed, in a society divided and often enough polarized on basic question, and where persuasion is ineffective at generating agreements, the state -- perhaps unwillingly so -- becomes a patron to ideology. Each and every faction in society seeks the patronage of state power as a means of imposing its particular understanding of the good on the whole of society." (103-104) I love how he writes.

So now more and more is being decided by ideologically-driven special interest groups try to influence the state. There are examples aplenty. Sexuality and family, education, science and technology, all have become battlegrounds for ideology. The same is true with the arts, and the media. Not just that Fox is conservative and CNN is liberal, but "Unless the topic is a human interest story buried at the end of the newscast or in the back pages of the newspaper or news magazine, news reporting on almost any issue is framed in terms of who is winning and who is losing the contest for political advantage." (104)

I would add (as he does not) that politicization often shape the narratives of popular culture as well.

In the past, political change happened through palace/elite revolutions. Now everyone is called to become "involved" in politics.

We label people we disagree with (feminist, liberal, fundamentalist) to discredit them. And other categories (sex, race, class, sexual orientation, "categories that are not in themselves political,

become suffused with political meaning." (105)

Next to occupation, political affiliation contributes the most to a person's perceived identity, of one's worth even. At the extreme, "...partisan commitment becomes a measure of their moral significance; of whether a person is judged good or bad." (105) Incipt identity politics.

With the politicization of public life, everything comes to be seen in light of how it advances or undermines my group's influence.

There is no acceptable space for organizations or movements that are completely independent of the political realm. And in return, politics bears the burden of impossibly high expectations (cf. "Yes We Can"/Obama as Messiah circa 2008).

#Hunter: "We look to politics as the leading way to address our common problems and implicitly hope that politics will actually solve those problems." (106)

And such politicization leads to a Nietzschean struggle of ideologies for state control. "When one boils it all down, politicization means that the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive power of the state. When politicization is oriented toward the interests of the group w/o an appeal to the common weal, when its means of mobilizing the uncommitted is thru fear, and when the pursuit of agendas depends more on the vilification of opponents than on the affirmation of higher ideals, power is stripped to its most elemental forms." (106) Democracy then becomes a veneer over the will to power - democratic means to dominate and rule the other.

#Hunter says that postmodernists conclude too quickly that this is all politics is anyway. They paint "power" with too broad a brush, and ignore the "layers of meaning that human beings impute to their own lives." (107) (Bonus points for a great use of "impute"). But given the blindness of postmodern theorists, the fact is, with the loss of common culture, politics be gettin' ugly Nietzschean.

Which brings us to Nietzsche's idea of resentiment: "a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action." (107) Fun! Resentiment is grounded in a "narrative of injury, or at least, of perceived injury." That is, each group tries to fashion a history of being unjustly treated to gain leverage in the current political debates.

That injustice becomes central to a person's identity. Cultivating a fear of future injury becomes a way of generating solidarity. The injuries might be exaggerated (or not), but they serve to vilify one's ideological opponent, to justify revenge.

#Hunter: "Ressentiment, then, is expressed as a discourse of negation; the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable." (108) These facts (politicization, ressentiment) have come to shape what Hunter calls "political culture." Especially in post-Depression era New Deal America (and beyond).

#Hunter: "It is my contention that Nietzsche was mostly right; that while the will to power has always been present, American democracy increasingly operates w/in a political culture - that is, a framework of meaning - that sanctions a will to domination. This, in turn, is fueled by a political psychology of fear, anger, negation, and revenge over perceived wrongs." (108-109). Rings true during a campaign year, doesn't it?

So the next question, then, is: How do Christians relate to this political culture? That's going to be the next few chapters.

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