

## ***Culture Wars Produce Economic Fallout*** ***“Sorry our market is closed because we don’t like you”***

By Tom Tresser

What is the “Culture Wars”?

There is actually a website, Culture Wars 101 and it cites Professor James Davison Hunter, a professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. He wrote “Culture Wars – The Struggle to Define America” (1991) and “Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America’s Culture War” (1994) -- “The American ‘culture wars’, or, as James Davison Hunter put it, “the struggle to define America” revolve around such topics as abortion, homosexuality, and public schools. These are all topics in which people alternatively described as ‘pro-family activists’, ‘concerned religious conservatives’, the ‘Christian Right’ or ‘religious-political extremists’ become involved.”

(<http://sepwww.stanford.edu/sep/josman/culture>)

Richard Florida wrote an article in the January/February issue of *Washington Monthly*, “Creative Class War – How the GOP’s Anti-Elitism Could Ruin America’s Economy.”

(<http://www.creativeclass.org/hotpress.shtml>). He cites a note he received from a noted researcher at a midwestern university:

“From bloggers and programmers to members of the National Academy I have spoken with, all find the Zeitgeist alien and even threatening. My friend says it is like trying to research and do business in the 21st century in a culture that wants to live in the 19th, empires, bibles and all. There is an E.U. fellowship through the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Amsterdam that everyone and their mother is trying to get.”

In the article Florida wonders if the combination of Far Right religious dogma becoming litmus tests for public policy and anti-outsider mentality embodied by many post 9/11 security measures will have a toxic effect on America’s creative economy.

He’s not alone.

Dr. Joel Cracraft is Curator-In-Charge, Department of Ornithology at American Museum of Natural History, and is also the President of the American Institute of Biological Sciences ([www.aibs.org](http://www.aibs.org)). He wrote an editorial for the Institute’s January journal, “The New Creationism and Its Threat to Science Literacy and Education.”



“Just how widespread is science literacy in the United States? That this country is the acknowledged leader of scientific research in terms of quantity and overall quality suggests our scientific enterprise is robust. Nevertheless, there is evidence that most US citizens have a poor understanding of science and only marginal interest in it (see the latest National Science Foundation survey on science indicators at [www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind02/c7/c7h.htm](http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind02/c7/c7h.htm)).

The most publicly contentious issue in science—the teaching of evolution—illustrates the point: About half of those surveyed by NSF do not believe humans evolved from earlier species, and two-thirds think that creationism

should be taught alongside evolution in public schools. But there is some good news: Acceptance of human evolution inched into the majority for the first time (53 percent). Moreover, according to a poll by People for the American Way ([www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=2095](http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=2095)), a substantial majority (83 percent) think that evolution should be taught and that it is not incompatible with a belief in God (70 percent).”

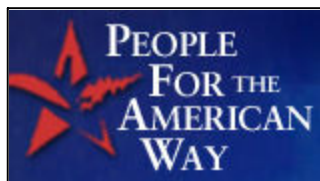
Dr. Cracraft concludes with “AIBS, in collaboration with the National Center for Science Education, is working to meet the challenge of creationism (see [www.aibs.org](http://www.aibs.org) and [www.ncseweb.org](http://www.ncseweb.org)). Over the course of this year, AIBS will be launching new educational initiatives, including a symposium at the 2004 annual meeting of the National Association of Biology Teachers ([www.nabt.org](http://www.nabt.org)), to expand and improve the teaching of evolution. It is critical that all scientists, including non-biologists, see themselves as part of this effort.”

Florida’s research colleague, Gary J. Gates, is a demographer at the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. His research on the correlation of economic health and places where same-sex couples live has become integrated into Florida’s regional rankings of the Creative Economy.

Quoted in March 8th edition of the Indianapolis Star, Gates reflecting on the premise of a region’s desire to be economically competitive and, at the same time, intolerant of gays and other different groups, says “Our work suggests that you can’t have it both ways... Say I’m a high-tech company looking at three or four different places, and they are offering basically the same package of initiatives. The next question is, what delineates you from others... Places that give evidence of being more accepting of differences tend to do better in the creative economy.”

Florida’s article makes the point that the political philosophies driving economic policy are wrong-headed. “You don’t have to be a Democrat to recognize that the political polarization of America and GOP dominance of Washington are not necessarily good news for America’s economic future. Yet it’s clear that Democrats themselves don’t quite get it... It is a sad irony: America’s creative economy sparked a demographic shift and a political polarization that now threaten to choke that economy off. What America desperately needs now is political leadership savvy enough to bridge that gap. To his credit, President Bush has made the Republican Party much more immigrant-friendly. But his talk about diversity seems almost entirely pitched to win the working-class Hispanic vote; he seems uninterested, to say the least, in changing other policies that are driving away the high-end immigrants and generally undermining the creative economy. To his credit, Howard Dean has tried to speak to his party of the need to put forth policies that appeal to citizens in both blue and red parts of the country. But as he showed with remarks about reaching out to guys with rebel flags on their pickups, he seems, to say the least, not to have found the language to do so.

The challenge for the GOP, if it wants to avoid running the economy into the ground, is to stop sneering at the elites, the better to win votes in their base, and to start paying attention to economic policies that might lift all boats. The challenge for Democrats, if they want to win, is to find ways of reaching out to the rest of the country, to convince at least some of its many regions that policies which operate to the interests of the creative class are in their interests as well.”



People for the American Way is a left-leaning citizen’s action organization that has been tracking the political efforts of the Religious Right since 1980 and has a special section of their website devoted to a Right Wing Watch. One of their reporters attended the 32nd annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), held Jan.22-24 in Arlington, Virginia, attended by over 4,000 people and reported that:

“The central theme at CPAC was the uncertain direction and future of the Republican Party with Bush at its helm. Many questioned to what degree Republican success and the conservative agenda are at odds with one another. The conference covered a wide range of topics, including one perennial favorite, the inherent evilness of liberals. “Warrior,” a former WWF wrestler turned right-wing activist, called liberals “mindless, sub-human beasts” to a very enthusiastic crowd. Other topics included the wretchedness of taxes and government spending, and the dangers of feminism, abortion, and environmentalism. There were however, three touchstones that nearly every speaker referred to; judges, budget, and marriage...

Rep. Tom Feeney (R- FL) went directly to the heart of the matter -- the Right's efforts to defund government -- in his remarks about the growing "nanny state." He included the following government programs in his list of troublesome cradle-to-grave programs-- early childhood education, K-12 public school, community college, higher education and social security. At the \$110 dollar Ronald Reagan Banquet Dinner the Republican members who voted against Bush's Medicare expansion plan were all honored for standing up against entitlements for senior citizens. While conservatives may stress the need for a smaller, limited government, they're clear about the need to have government intervene when it comes to equal rights for gays and lesbians.



Grover Norquist addressed the opportunity to build the Republican Party through the issue of the privatization of social security. Norquist began his speech with the usual liberal-bashing, declaring that the Right is "people with jobs and who go to church." Norquist said that "the Left are not friends, they're not allies, they're competing parasites" and that if the Republicans take away their resources they'll just fight amongst themselves. Norquist made his case that the current majority of investors are Republicans and therefore privatizing social security and making all of Americans investors will naturally make more people Republicans. According to Norquist, the privatization of social security will have the added benefit of protecting corporations as well, because the public will view Democrat's attacks on corporations as hurting their personal retirement futures. Norquist asked, if Democrats no longer have "class warfare" to campaign on, what would they have left? He answered his own question by saying they'll just become the "weird sex party." Norquist believes that people who own guns, home-school or send their kids to private school-- the "leave us alone coalition"-- will have all have less need for government and will want to eliminate entitlement programs such as social security." (<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=14116>) More about Mr. Norquist: [http://www.mediatransparency.org/people/grover\\_norquist.htm](http://www.mediatransparency.org/people/grover_norquist.htm).

To sum up, a Culture War agenda that is aligned with a very far right leaning social policy would seem to have a number of negative consequences for the Creative Economy:

- (1) **Orthodoxy of thought and conduct** – There is a code of acceptable thinking and acting – which tends to reflect fundamentalist readings of the Christian Bible – that is being translated into public policy. The Right wing Culture Warriors want you to look like them, think like them, and make love they do. Artists, creative thinkers, gays, people who challenge authority and most of the writers for Newtopia wouldn't fare very well in an America where the Left loses the Culture Wars.
- (2) **Erosion of church and state barriers** – The successful prosecution of Culture Wars by the Right includes applying religious litmus tests to secular activities, such as public funding of private programs, the teaching of science, the selection of judges and awarding of research grants. Where there is a state religion, it's easy to demonize your opponents and accuse them of being unmoral and not worthy of God's grace and even, life, itself. The fundamental rule of law comes in question in a theocracy. I'm Jewish and I feel that if America goes fully religious, that Jews will fare any too well.
- (3) **Isolationism and prosecution of the stranger** – This is related to the enforcing of a Fundamentalist viewpoint but is connected to the current national security frenzy and has grave implications for our immigration policies and the face America shows to the world and the millions of people who might want to move here. The Right leaning Culture War advocates tend to demonize Islam and Muslims and have no trouble applying "God-Fearing," "Righteousness" and religion-laden terms to American foreign policy priorities. Most business writers point to the globalization of the economy and the increasing diversity of America's own population. Isolationism and fundamentalist tribalism goes against this trend and threatens to cause an exodus of creative talent and a barrier to incoming talent – potentially turning America into a creative backwater and also-ran.

I've contacted a number of prominent business thinkers who have researched, written and editorialized on the need for innovation and renewable creativity as necessary ingredients for America's economic survival. I've asked them to comment on the economic impacts of the Culture Wars. As their responses come in, we'll post them here.

---

Tom Tresser is a consultant, producer, educator and trainer who can help individuals, companies and communities leverage and amplify their creative assets in order to solve problems, create economic value and trigger civic engagement. Tom has been a long-time advocate for an increased appreciation for the role of creativity in the life of the community. In 1991 he started an organization that organized artists and cultural workers for political activism and taught "Arts and Public Policy" at Roosevelt University, where he organized a center for the study of cultural policy. Tom was Director Cultural Development at Peoples Housing, a nonprofit community development corporation operating in northeast Chicago, where he organized a community arts program that combined culture and economic development. Tom served as lead organizer for the Chicago Park District for two years in a pilot project that transformed a major regional park into a community cultural center. In April 2004, Tom was elected to a two-year term for the Local School Council for the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. He lectures on "The Politics of Creativity" and conducts leadership training sessions for artists and creative professionals. He teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



[www.tresser.com](http://www.tresser.com) – [tom@tresser.com](mailto:tom@tresser.com)