Growing Out of America’s Divided Culture

Text and Slides of Steve McIntosh’s Lecture
Given at Keystone College
July 15, 2017

Institute for Cultural Evolution
Good afternoon, and thank you to the organizers of this symposium. I’m a writer in the field of cultural development. Since 2001 my work has explored how the evolution of values impacts politics and spirituality. After more than a decade working in this field I began to feel a sense of duty to try to apply the ideas I’d been writing about to help overcome dysfunction in America’s political system. So in 2012 some colleagues and I founded a boutique political think tank called The Institute for Cultural Evolution.

Our focus is on the political issues that are most impacted by America’s culture war. We began with a campaign to help sort out the conflicting values surrounding the issue of climate change. But this led us to see that the underlying problem preventing meaningful action on climate change was hyper-partisan political polarization. So this has been the primary focus on our think tank, as well as my work in politics, ever since.

As has now become apparent, American society is deeply divided. Until recently, however, most of the experts argued that even though Washington D.C. was severely polarized, ordinary Americans actually agreed on most issues. The argument was that Americans had been “sorted” into artificially polarized camps by the Democratic and Republican parties.

But after the 2016 election, even the most ardent centrists admit that our stark political divisions are actually a symptom of a larger rift in the cultural fabric of our society overall.

Every human polity is, of course, characterized by divisions. These natural differences of opinion arise from the fact that some people are focused primarily on improving what’s wrong, while others are more focused on preserving what’s right.

When political differences are contained within an overriding agreement about a common good, such as the good of the country, or our common interests as Americans, this can
serve as a binding element that can moderate competition between political opponents. When opposing sides compete within the framework of a larger agreement of cooperation, this can generate authentic value and help make political progress. But when the binding element of a common goal is lost, centrifugal political forces can cause positions to fly apart, preventing any agreement whatsoever.

So this is where we are. And at this point, the problem of a bitterly divided electorate is arising \textit{upstream} from Washington politics. It’s a cultural problem that requires a cultural solution.

As the famous psychologist Carl Jung observed, “we don’t solve our problems, we rather outgrow them.” And hyper-partisan polarization is a problem we can only really solve by \textit{maturing beyond it}.

In fact, America has become severely polarized as a result of cultural development. Indeed, our culture itself can best be understood as a developmental process. And although regress or stagnation are always possible, I think we can and will make developmental progress in the time ahead.

Yet you may ask, what does “development” really mean? If we conceive of cultural development as social progress, we can begin to see the problem. Americans do not agree about what constitutes progress.

However, whether we view it as progress or regress, over the last fifty years American society has experienced massive changes, for both good and bad. And while some segments of American culture have embraced these changes, others have strongly opposed them.

As American culture continues to \textit{stretch out} and become more differentiated, the idea that we can recover old forms of centrist consensus—gluing the old broken pieces back
together again—is no longer viable. Bipartisan compromise is certainly good where you can get it. But as I argue at length in a recent article on the ICE website, Why Centrism Fails, centrism has shown itself to be a failed strategy.

Because our cultural divisions are the result of growth and differentiation, in order to overcome our deep divisions, we need to grow further. That is, in order to create the new agreements that will be required for our partial political reconciliation, we will need to expand the scope of what Americans are able to value.

In other words, we don’t necessarily need people to change their values, we need people to broaden their sympathy for a wider spectrum of values to see how, at a foundational level, they already share many of the core values of those they oppose.

Expert commentators on polarization often ignore or discount the need for a cultural solution because they don’t really know how to bring about cultural change. Culture is only vaguely understood, so the idea that we can change it seems beyond the realm of possibilities. Cultural development, however, is our main focus at the Institute for Cultural Evolution.

The art of intentionally fostering cultural development is still in its infancy. But the project of working toward cultural maturation begins with a deeper understanding of culture itself. Human culture is, of course, highly complex; it can’t be framed or mapped by a single model. But culture can be better understood by examining it from a variety of different conceptual angles—different analytical slices of this complex developing phenomenon.

And one partial but promising approach that can help us better understand cultural development involves framing culture in terms of worldviews.

A worldview, as we define it, is a coherent set of values and ideals that persist across multiple generations. Worldviews are large-scale social agreements about what is good, true, and beautiful. They give meaning to reality and help us understand the world.

In fact, worldviews are arguably the basic units of culture. And while we can certainly identify thousands of different worldviews in American culture, for purposes of understanding cultural development the worldviews that matter most are the historically significant ones that organize society, frame values, provide personal identity, and play a recognizable role in world history.

This next slide’s image of “the eye” illustrating a worldview is fairly cliché. So I want to use this alternative iceberg image instead, which is more suggestive of the complexity involved. The tip of the iceberg represents the conscious part of a worldview, and the underwater part represents the subconscious collective aspect.
While the concept of a worldview inevitably rests on generalizations, there is plenty of evidence for the existence of these macro social structures. The significance of cultural worldviews is well recognized in the fields of sociology, psychology, and political science. Indeed, when we ask what our modern world is—when we ask what modernity is—the best answer is that modernity is a worldview.

Modernity, however, is not America’s only major worldview. As I’m about to explain in a very simplified manner, at this time in history, American culture is shaped by three historically significant worldviews.

The two most obvious and well recognized American worldviews are usually referred to as “modernism” and “traditionalism.” That is, the traditional religious worldview (which includes a variety of religions), and the mainstream establishment worldview of modernity.

The existence of these two competing worldviews is well established in our national discourse. For example, some of you might have read Thomas Friedman’s book, *The Lexus and Olive Tree*, which describes the contours of the two cultures of traditionalism and modernity.
In terms of political preferences, those who hold a traditional worldview are mostly on the right. The modernist worldview, however, includes both a right and a left wing. In fact, the culture of modernism is split down the middle between liberals and conservatives.

We’re all familiar with this image of America’s red states and blue states. After the last election, America looks pretty red.

![Map of red and blue states]

But remember, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. So if we skew the map to reflect population, it looks more like this:

![Map with population skew]

As the 2016 election results confirm, America seems to be fairly equally divided. However, the simple idea of red states and blue states does not really get at the deeper cultural level where our conflict resides. To get to the root of the problem we need to consider the value foundations of our society.

This next slide illustrates how America’s “bedrock values” lie at the foundation of our politics. Most of the visible political activity occurs in these top layers of elected officials, political parties, and well-defined issue positions and political interests. But when we look
below the surface of our “red/blue divide” to consider the sometimes subconscious bedrock values of our society, we begin to recognize three major worldviews in American culture: the mainstream worldview of modernity, the traditional religious worldview, and a progressive, or what we might term “postmodern” worldview.

Although these worldviews are already familiar to most of us, let’s quickly go through the basic contours of these three major value frames so we’re all on the same page.

Modernity or modernism is America’s largest and most socially significant worldview. Modernism provides the cultural center of gravity for approximately 50% of the American population. Again, modernity is about equally divided between mainstream liberals and conservatives. Although these partisan camps have different priorities, they share most of the same basic values. This is why some complain that there is little difference between establishment Democrats and establishment Republicans.

What constitutes “modernity,” however, cannot be smoothly defined without oversimplifying or resorting to stereotypes. Yet I can point to some examples of this way of thinking, as shown in this next slide (on the next page).

Familiar modernist politicians include Bill Clinton, Jeb Bush, and Rand Paul.

Modernity is all around us, it is America’s dominant culture. We can see its values expressed in the world of business, in the sciences, and in the corporate media. But again, modernity is not the only major worldview in American culture.
Continuing our quick orientation to America’s three major worldviews, next comes the traditional worldview, which is also diverse, but politically its social conservatism means that this worldview is mostly identified with the right, as I mentioned.

Familiar politicians with a traditional center of gravity include Ted Cruz and Mike Huckabee. Examples of the traditional worldview are shown in the next slide.

Considering these two major cultural blocks of American society, it is important to emphasize that America is a modernist country. Indeed, the founding documents of the United States are a kind of manifesto of the values of modernity. Like the U.S. itself, these values are the product of the Enlightenment. And although modernity has certainly changed and evolved over the last 250 years, we can nevertheless recognize a continuity in this worldview over time.

While modernity originally emerged by breaking with the traditional worldview, pushing off against mythic religion and feudal forms of government, it also relied on and carried forward many of the values of traditionalism. In other words, modernity achieved its
cultural development by building on the social capital of traditionalism. For example, functional modernity relies on the traditional values of honesty, decency, fair play, and respect for rightful authority.

Although differences and tensions between modernism and traditionalism have driven history since the Enlightenment, during much of the 20th century there was a kind of cultural truce between these worldviews. And this cultural truce was the foundation of the strong consensus in American politics that prevailed after World War II until about 1968. Political scientists refer to this postwar period as the “liberal consensus.” And during this time American politics functioned relatively well.

However, beginning in the Sixties we have witnessed the rise of a third major worldview that now provides the cultural center of gravity for about 20% of the American population.

Although this progressive worldview has many strands and is much newer and more ideologically diverse than either modernity of traditionalism, in order to understand our contemporary cultural circumstances, we need to see how all the flavors of contemporary progressivism now cohere as a third major culture.

There is no agreed upon term for this third culture, but we refer to it as the “progressive postmodern worldview.” Admittedly, the term “postmodern” has been used in a more narrow sense to connote an art movement or critical academic deconstructionists. But in the work of the Institute for Cultural Evolution we use the word postmodernism in a
broader sense to describe the forms of culture that are collectively attempting to transcend modernity, or otherwise overcome the problems created by the advent of the modern world.

Mainstream establishment commentators can clearly see the parts of the postmodern worldview, such as the environmental movement, the movement for social justice and multiculturalism, alternative medicine and spirituality, the natural foods movement, and similar cultural currents. But even our most astute cultural observers often fail to appreciate how these strands of progressive culture now cohere in a distinct worldview—a third major culture.

Postmodernity, some examples:

**The Good**: environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, social justice, economic equality

**The True**: socially constructed truths, subjectivity, “whatever is true for you”

**The Beautiful**: nature, tribal aesthetics, yoga aesthetics, alternative musical forms

**U.S. Population**: ~20%
Bernie Sanders is a good example of a postmodern politician, but cultural figures such as Naomi Klein or Deepak Chopra are more representative of this culture than politicians.

Even through the Baby Boomer version and the Millennial version of this progressive culture are not the same, there is nevertheless an intergenerational continuity of values that establishes postmodernity as a historically significant worldview. What ties its disparate strands together is the agreement among postmodernists regarding the abundant pathologies of modernity. Anti-modernism is thus the hallmark of postmodernity in practically all its forms.

From some perspectives, modernity is the biggest advance in human history since the domestication of agriculture. But no matter how much progress this worldview has achieved, it is not the end of history. And over the last 50 years at least, sensitive thinkers and change agents have been attempting to transcend the values of modernity, which has led to the antithetical worldview of postmodernity.

In these slides I’m using the colors employed by the New York Times to illustrate the American political spectrum. During the 2016 primaries, the Times used red and blue to color the counties voting for Trump and Clinton, with green to indicate the counties that voted for Bernie Sanders, and yellow to indicate the Ted Cruz counties.

This slide above, however, shows these factions according to the timeline of their historical emergence, with the traditional worldview being the oldest, and the postmodern worldview the most recent. This demographic configuration helps us see these worldviews as sequentially emerging cultural structures. But if we map these worldviews onto the more familiar left/right political spectrum, it looks more like this:
So, as I’ve explained, there are three major worldviews. But because modernity is divided into left and right, this yields four major political positions. These “four cultures of America” were recently described in a New York Times op-ed by David Brooks. This perspective is thus gaining traction. And this framing also helps us see that there is more than one form of polarization in play.

This next slide illustrates multiple polarities at different levels: Within the overall left/right polarity, the smaller arrow in the middle illustrates the polarity between mainstream liberals and conservatives within modernity. And then there is the ongoing historical polarity between traditionalists and modernists on the right. But now we can also begin to see a polarity on the left between liberal modernists and progressive postmodernists. This polarity is demonstrated by the cultural differences between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Even though they agreed on most issues, there was a difference in their values that voters, especially Millennials, could detect.

Each of these levels of polarization can be understood as “interdependent polarities,” which I explain in another article on the Institute for Cultural Evolution’s website:
Overcoming Polarization by Evolving Both Right and Left. According to “polarity theory,” when contained within a common purpose, polarities can be generative. But when that common purpose is lost, polarities can become stuck, which is where we are now.

This slide shows the same polarities only in the worldview timeline framing.

But the left-right spectrum polarities slide (on the previous page) better illustrates how these multiple levels of polarity help shape our political culture. These polarizing forces create the differences that help us understand the political spectrum as more than a seamless continuum between left and right.

However, this demographic worldview framing of America’s three major cultures is nevertheless useful because it helps us gain the overview perspective necessary to bring the values of all three major worldviews together within a new cultural agreement that can appreciate the ongoing and enduring contributions of all three.

Values cohere in sets. And the sets of values that cohere into these major worldviews are each shaped by a specific set of problematic life conditions—problems that prevailed at the time these worldviews first emerged; and problem sets that are still with us today.

So when we see how each major worldview is focused on solving different sets of perceived problems, this can help us appreciate how each value set has an important and ongoing job to do.

The complication, however, is that each of these worldviews not only has important values that we need, they also have their own set of pathologies that we do well to avoid.

In the process of solving problems, each worldview creates new problems that can only be adequately addressed by the worldview that comes after it in the sequence of history.
Social progress is usually made by attempting to get away from what’s wrong. So social problems help define the available direction of advance. But you can only go so far in that direction before you have to make a course correction. In other words, these worldview structures evolve through a dialectical process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. It’s like a sailboat tacking back and forth against the wind.

As examples: the traditional worldview arises to solve problems of violence, egocentrism, and social chaos. Traditionalism brings order, but it creates oppression. And much of its mythic worldview is contradicted by science.

The worldview of modernity arises to solve the problems of poverty, ignorance, and a rigid class or caste system. Modernity brings prosperity, scientific medicine and technology, upward mobility and a middleclass. But it creates inequality and environmental destruction. And material success is ultimately unsatisfying—when people achieve everything modernity has to offer, they often ask: “Is this all there is?”

In the same way that traditionalism and modernism are each focused on ameliorating a specific set of problems, the postmodern worldview arises to help solve environmental degradation, racial and economic inequality, and the impoverished philosophy of scientism. Postmodernity brings awareness to these problems and seeks a new kind of liberation. In other words, the progressive postmodern worldview adds a new layer of care. But postmodernism also tends to alienate the rest of the society with its anti-modernism and even reverse patriotism.

Although it has achieved some victories, postmodernism remains relatively politically impotent regarding some of its central concerns, such as ameliorating climate change. Although postmodernism seeks to be inclusive, it is not inclusive enough to build the agreements it needs to be politically effective.

So the first step in framing a new political position that can overcome the animosity that is stymying our governing process involves helping each worldview see the others more clearly. And this involves carefully distinguishing between each worldview’s healthy and enduring values which we need, and the pathologies and negatives of each worldview that we can do without.

Therefore, in order to move toward a new political position that can sympathetically value the best of all three major worldviews, we have to distinguish the negatives from the positives—we have to tease apart each worldview’s “dignities from its disasters.”
So if we take the four major cultural blocks of American society (as previously shown in this slide) and map out the positive and negative aspects of each, we get these value charts below.

I show these values charts to illustrate how the Institute for Cultural Evolution approaches the practice of seeing the upside of each political position by acknowledging that each position—even the one we may identify with—has its own problems.

I’ve given the positive values of each position a nickname for easy reference. The traditional position is labeled “heritage values.” Fiscal conservatives and libertarians are organized around “liberty values.” Liberal modernists value “fairness,” and progressive postmodernists bring a new layer of “caring values” to our cultural discourse. And of course each position values all of these values to some extent.
For our purposes here we needn’t dwell on the specifics of these value categories. The point is that each category includes positive values that we need, as well as accompanying negatives that must be distinguished from the positives. So to make this point, the two charts above show a simplified version of the values charts on the previous page.

These values charts are useful because they provide a kind of practice that can lead to the new integrative political position we need to overcome our gridlocked politics. Seeing values in this way leads to a “higher form of centrism,” if you will; a more inclusive perspective that provides a way for us to expand the scope of what we’re able to value.

From *within* anyone of these values categories, the negatives of the other categories appear most prominently.

But once we stand outside our own position to better recognize the bedrock values that underpin American culture as a whole, this can help depolarize our thinking. And once we begin to tease apart the dignities from the disasters of each position, the next step toward cultural maturation involves the political practice of **values integration**.

If we can sympathetically appreciate all these major value sets for ourselves—if we can expand the scope of what we are able to personally value—we can bring these diverse values together within our own positions and opinions. By expanding our own values, we can literally “become the change we want to see in the world.”

Opposing political *interests* are often irreconcilable—at the level of perceived interests we’re often faced with a win-lose proposition. But at the level of bedrock *values*, integrating different positions becomes more possible.
The issue of gay marriage provides a prime example of successful values integration. The right for gays to marry advances postmodern caring values, liberal fairness values, libertarian freedom values, and crucially, traditional family values.

Traditionalists who otherwise object to “sexual decadency” find it much harder to resist calls for the basic right to make a family commitment through the institution of marriage. While perceived traditionalist interests are not included in the new right for gays to marry, traditionalist values are included nonetheless. It was thus through values integration that this once-polarized issue has not only become law, it has also gained widespread social acceptance.

Another example of a political cause that is achieving success by integrating values from across the spectrum is the legalization of marijuana. Like gay marriage, legal pot integrates postmodern caring values with libertarian freedom values, and again crucially, it also
integrates the conservative value of federalism, which seeks to allow local populations to determine political questions such as prohibition.

Conversely, in the same way that values integration explains the recent success, even within our polarized political culture, of issues like gay marriage and legal marijuana, the lack of adequate values integration helps explain why other issues remain stuck. The issue of climate change, for example, has yet to achieve much political success because its advocates have failed to adequately integrate the values of the right side of the spectrum into their cause. In their otherwise admirable efforts to preserve the environment, climate change activists often repudiate modernist prosperity values as well as traditional conservation values.

But when we fail to value the bedrock values of our countrymen, this leads to cultural and political alienation. And this is a big part of what has led to the Trump administration.

The practice of values integration is not about coalition building or issues horse trading. This practice involves giving our opponents a say without even asking them, because we already value their values. As this final slide suggests, these distinct worldviews can be reconciled and integrated within one political viewpoint. Because these are the values that have constructed our culture as a whole, each of us is already using these values to some extent, whether we’re fully conscious of it or not.

So this has been a peek at one of the ways that we’re trying to understand culture at the level of values. There are additional frames that illuminate culture from different angles, together with other practices that can foster cultural development. And we’ll explore these additional practices in my workshop tomorrow. Thank you for your time and interest.