“This is not the traditional culture war”

Interview with R.R. Reno (in New York, USA)

Rod Dreher in his book *The Benedict Option* argues that American conservatives have lost the culture wars. Do you agree with this view or can we still speak of culture wars in the United States?

I think that we can speak of culture wars in America today even more so than ever. Trump put the wall at the center of his campaign rhetoric. The wall is an image of two visions of the future. One is a sort of utopian, borderless world with fluid interactions of all human beings in a universal community. The other is the vision of a particular national community, and the wall represents the reconsolidation of this vision. I would say, therefore, that this is not the traditional culture wars – about abortion, gender, and sexuality – that have been so prominent in American cultural politics, but is culture wars over two divergent visions of community. This is true as much for the United States as it is for Europe. You see, I was born in 1959, so I am socialized into a certain consensus about 20th-century history. This consensus is “never again.” “Never again” is a very powerful cultural imperative, in particular in Europe. But when Trump went to Warsaw, he offered a different reading of 20th-century history and a different imperative. In his speech in Warsaw, Trump dwelt on the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and the message was, instead of “never again,” “let us honor the courage and let’s live like that.” So, his message was not “never again,” but, “let’s do that again”! This was very striking to me.

Some commentators reacted very critically to that speech and called it ethno-nationalist and dangerous.

The question is: are we on the cusp of neo-fascism, or are we on the cusp of a kind of dissolving globalism? If you think it's the dissolving globalism, then you will welcome Trump's speech. If you think we're on the cusp of neo-fascism, then you recoil in horror. This is the situation of American politics; Trump is a divisive figure for almost exclusively cultural reasons, for reasons over different visions of the future and of community. If you look back to the leading political and intellectual figures of the post-Second World War era, we see that they were all instrumental for creating that 20th-century consensus. My intuition is that this consensus is now becoming unraveled – which makes sense, it's been seventy years, that is a long time for a consensus to hold sway. We underestimate how deeply the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and its final dissolution in 1991 have put into question the cultural consensus organized around Cold War imperatives.

Can you explain this in more detail?

By Cold War consensus I basically mean a center-right and center-left consensus. This is very well discernible in the American politics. I give you an example: In 1940, the United States Supreme Court said that a Jehovah's Witness child was obligated to say the Pledge of Allegiance. They did not have a right, a religious right of conscience, to opt out of what was thought to be the indispensable tool for consolidating solidarity and unity. And in 1943, the very same Court reversed itself on the Jehovah's Witnesses and said that children of Jehovah's Witnesses had a constitutional right to opt out of this collective ritual. I think this was a turning point, it was in 1943 when the American elites became worried that we would become our enemy to defeat our enemy. And so I think that from that point onwards, the consensus center-right and center-left was that America had to open things up and loosen things. Racial discrimination in the United States is, if you will, a sort of American Auschwitz, it is our "never again." People on the center-right typically said "well, not too fast

with cultural deregulation”; people on the center-left said “not too fast with economic deregulation”; but everybody generally agreed that we would be a better society if we were more open, more fluid, more inclusive, more diverse, less regulated, more dynamic, more innovative, more creative. All those terms, innovation, creativity, diversity, inclusion, they all connote fluidity and openness. And they were largely shared between the Right and the Left.

And this consensus is now being unraveled?

Exactly. The end of the Cold War has made the cultural consensus of the Cold War era, built around “never again,” “diversity over unity,” and “openness over closure” both more powerful and more dysfunctional. It became more powerful, because there was no opposition any longer, and it became dysfunctional, because it took on a life of its own and was no longer serving the purposes for which it was originally created. That is true in Europe as well, I think.

I agree with you that your analysis also holds true for Europe. Also in Europe we are living through battles over what makes for a good society between a cosmopolitan and a nationalist vision. In this context, I wanted to talk with you about Russia. From your observation, when did people searching for reconsolidation and unity over cosmopolitanism and diversity start to look at Russia as a potential partner?

American social conservatives have indeed become kind of pro-Putin. It is really about Putin, not about Russia and not about the Russian Orthodox Church. I think that the starting point for this positive vision of Putin was in 2013, when the British government threatened to cut off foreign aid to Uganda because of their anti-gay laws. On this occasion, Putin began to make statements against the decadent West. He began to position himself in the context of the unravelling consensus we talked about earlier. During the Cold War, America used to be leader of the free world versus the totalitarian world, right? In 2013, Putin started to position Russia as the leader of the moral world versus the decadent world. That was was a

brilliant strategic move on his part; perhaps it's sincere, perhaps it's cynical, in a certain sense it doesn't really matter, because it achieved its goal: it undermined the West's geopolitical and cultural consensus.

Why is gay marriage such a central issue in the affirmation or undermining of this cultural consensus?

The question of gay marriage has created a feeling of existential threat to conservative Christians in the United States. When the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage across the country, it did so on the grounds of protection of freedoms. The protection against racial discrimination has been extended to include discrimination on the basis of sex, and now of sexual orientation. Social conservatives, who dissent with this move, felt threatened. And they began to look for a protector, for a champion: "Who's going to fight for me?" And there's Vladimir Putin, waving his Russian flag, saying "I'll fight for you!"

So you would say that 2013 was the moment when both sides began to realize that there was an increasingly globalized battle over cultural issues?

Yes, that is my assessment. The Obama administration made gay rights a real priority, also in foreign policy. From my point of view, it was strategically crazy on the part of the United States administration to do that, because it injected our cultural conflicts into the global scene. The Obama administration basically created the opportunity for Putin to make a counter move.

Interviewed by Kristina Stoeckl, November 2017