

Culture Is Where Democracy Lives or Dies, Because Politics Always Follows the Story a Nation Tells Itself

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Gavin Newsom knows that **politics isn't just about policy papers or legislative roll calls; it's about culture, imagery, and the stories people tell each other.** That's why he's been trolling Trump online with parody memes and razor-sharp mockery that's spread faster than any campaign ad ever could.

The effect is unmistakable: Newsom is shifting the cultural battlefield, showing that Democrats can seize the same terrain of humor and symbolism Republicans have dominated since Nixon's "law and order" days; he's left conservative pundits — particularly on Fox "News" — sputtering.

It's the kind of cultural jujitsu that Antonio Gramsci imagined — flipping power by seizing the symbols and frames of your opponent — and it's the kind of thing Democrats have needed to do for years but haven't successfully pulled off since the days of FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society.

Gramsci sat in one of Mussolini's prison cells in the 1920s and 1930s, scribbling his Prison Notebooks and thinking about power. The Italian Marxist theorist recognized something most political leaders of his era missed: **raw political control is never enough.**

To truly rule with the broad consent of a nation's citizens, he realized, you have to shape the culture. You have to convince people that your worldview is "common sense," that your version of reality is the only normal, natural way to see the world.

He called this "cultural hegemony." The churches, the schools, the newspapers, the songs people sang, the plays they watched and the

stories they told all carried values. And those values shaped politics far more than any speech in parliament.

If you win the cultural battle, he argued, you will inevitably win the political one.

Gramsci's ideas didn't stay locked up with him. They passed through post-war European intellectuals, the British cultural theorists of the 1950s and 60s, and the American left in the academy. But conservatives were reading too, and by the 1990s a handful of right-wing thinkers had begun warning that liberals were using "cultural Marxism" to dominate universities and Hollywood.

Their solution was simple: steal Gramsci's insight and use it to push back. Andrew Breitbart put the slogan on bumper stickers: "Politics is downstream from culture." Steve Bannon made it into a strategy for the Trump White House.

Change the story the nation tells itself, control the cultural conversation, and politics will follow. . . .

The lesson is the same in every case. Republicans don't win by having better policies: their policies are almost uniformly cruel, corrupt, and designed to serve the morbidly rich at the expense of everyone else.

They win because they fight at the cultural level. They win because they tell a story, over and over, that makes people feel. Democrats, for decades, have responded with charts that only tickle the intellect. . . .

If Democrats want to win again, they have to stop ceding the cultural battlefield. Instead, they need to seize today's opportunities to fully engage in the culture wars, from policy prescriptions to Gavin Newsom ridiculing Trump to JB Pritzker calling out the GOP's embrace of fascism. . . .

Republicans learned from Gramsci and weaponized culture. They turned it into dog whistles, slogans, and memes that bypass reason and lodge themselves in the national gut. Democrats can learn from the same

source without resorting to the GOP's lying, cruelty, and thinly coded racism. . . .

[Pat Buchanan was the Republican politician who was responsible for launching the "culture wars." Buchanan was a conservative journalist who worked in the Nixon and Reagan administrations before running for the Republican presidential nomination in 1992. Although he lost the nomination to George H.W. Bush, he was invited to speak at that year's Republican National Convention, where he delivered a fiery address criticizing liberals and declaring a "culture war" at the heart of American life. GS]

The Democrats of the New Deal and Great Society eras knew how to speak to the heart as well as the head. **They knew that politics is not just about what laws are passed but about what stories a nation tells itself about who it is. They knew that culture is not an afterthought; it is the riverbed through which politics flows.**

Republicans now know it too, and they've been poisoning that river for half a century. If Democrats want to save democracy, they must reclaim the story of America, the cultural high ground, and the word freedom itself.

* Text emphases added.