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The Culture Wars and Psychology: Robert Jay Lifton's *The Protean Self*

Lifton, Robert Jay, *The Protean Self. Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*. New York: Basic Books. Hardback, 1993. ISBN 0-465-06420-5, US\$25. Paperback, 1995. ISBN 0-465-06421-3, US\$13.

I recently saw a button in one of the shops in the college town where I live. On the top half, in blue lettering against white, it states: SECULAR HUMANIST. The bottom half, in white lettering against blue, reads: FUNDAMENTALISTS CAN GO TO HECK! The button is a tiny testament to the culture wars being waged in the United States (Hunter, 1991). Pithily and bluntly, it divides those who regard moral truths as relative and historically bound from those who regard the truth as given by a supernatural, external authority.

The culture wars are waged not only on buttons sold by college-town stores but also on radio talk-shows, at art exhibits, in front of abortion clinics and at school-board meetings. The wars also find expression in the social sciences. A recent book by Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self*, is one such expression. Lifton distinguishes between a 'protean self' and a 'fundamentalist self'. He presents his distinction between these two selves as being based upon their psychological capacities to change and the fluidity of their personalities, the protean self excelling at change and the fundamentalist self failing. Lifton's attempt to conceive of identity and psychological health in a novel way (with the goal of a changing identity rather than the more traditional psychological emphasis upon stability) and his evident concern with ameliorating

human suffering and evil are admirable. However, his portrayal of the fundamentalist self is tendentious. In the course of reading Lifton's book, the difference that emerges most clearly between the protean self and fundamentalist self is not their capacity for change, but rather what they regard as the source of moral authority and their political ideologies. Each self seems capable of change within the different parameters defined by their moral, political and religious worldviews. In the end, Lifton's description of the fundamentalist self seems less focused on understanding its psychology and more focused on using psychological concepts and therapeutic language to denounce the fundamentalist self as unhealthy and potentially dangerous. Thus Lifton's book can be read as another expression of the culture wars.

The sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991) uses the concept of culture wars to describe an ideological and cultural conflict facing contemporary America which cuts across religious denominational lines and pits so-called 'orthodox' and 'progressivist' groups against one another (see also Wuthnow, 1989). Those who are orthodox share a commitment to following the dictates of an external and transcendent authority (God or natural law), whatever their denomination. They believe in an everlasting and universally applicable moral code (known by reference to, for example, the Bible, the Torah and the community that upholds it, or the Book of Mormon). In contrast, those who are progressivist are united in the view that morality is mediated through and expressed by humans, and as such moral truths are historically bound. Typically, progressivists seek to ground moral authority in personal experiences or scientific rationality. They seek to arrive at ethical principles that have various individual and human goods as their end.

The orthodox and progressivist groups' different overall conceptions of moral authority are associated with differences in their more specific beliefs and rules of conduct. Generally, orthodox groups hold that God is the author of the world and human life; that human life begins at conception, and is sacred from that point on; that men and women are differentiated according to role, psyche and spiritual calling; that human sexuality is subject to divine commands and ought only to find expression within the state of matrimony between a man and a woman; and that parents have inherent authority over their children. In contrast, the progressivists tend to hold that personhood begins close to or at birth; that men and women are differentiated merely by anatomy; that human sexuality is socially constructed and thus a variety of sexual expressions are legitimate which allow for the expression of individual sexual needs; and that marriage and family

structures are historically and culturally determined and therefore subject to change in accordance with individual needs.¹

Hunter (1991) argues that because the division between orthodox and progressivist groups is based upon their distinctively different conceptions of truth and moral logic, a reconciliation between their points of view is virtually impossible.² In turn, this leads to attempts by both sides to discredit the opposition by portraying it in strongly negative terms. Orthodox groups label progressivists as militants, amoral, anti-Christian, intellectual barbarians, godless secular humanists (the button mentioned earlier defiantly appropriates this label), and so forth. For their part, progressivists brand orthodox believers as religious nuts, fanatics, extremists, moral zealots, irrational, misanthropic, right-wing homophobes, and so forth. Attempts to portray the other side as being divorced from the mainstream may occur by the use of labels and terms that have strong religious and political connotations, as Hunter describes it. However, the language of therapy may also be used, as it is by Lifton in his newest book.

The protean self, as portrayed by Lifton, has an ever-changing and fluid identity (like the Greek god Proteus), making it well adapted to our contemporary world. It juggles multiple meaning systems and is skeptical of belief systems, combines 'odd' (i.e. diverse and seemingly incompatible; p. 50) interests and identity elements, seeks a non-traditional career pattern, reverses conventional gender roles and reacts to the contemporary experience with humor. The protean self also 'cope[s] with, and sometimes even cultivate[s], feelings of fatherlessness and homelessness' (p. 5), that is, it establishes and changes its identity free of the constraints of family, community and other sources of authority. In contrast, the fundamentalist self typically lacks these qualities, according to Lifton. It does not adapt to the postmodern world but reacts and retreats from the world in a psychologically unhealthy manner. The fundamentalist self is 'constrict[ed]' (pp. 10, 160), 'close[d] down' (p. 160), and 'obsessed' (p. 171) with controlling self and others. Lifton describes the fundamentalist self as living in this world in accordance with a totalistic worldview while longing for the next world. The fundamentalist self is far from well adapted, in Lifton's analysis.

However, the protean ideal that emerges in Lifton's book is not free to change its principles and identity to any shape or form. In fact, the protean self's capacity for change is delineated by its worldview, the same way that the fundamentalist self's capacity for change is delineated by its worldview. Lifton primarily bases his protean profile upon a sample of what he describes as 'social activists' and 'civic leaders' (p. 6)

(the sample size is not provided). Yet, from the examples that Lifton gives it is clear that the causes supported by these activists and leaders by and large are confined to a liberal political agenda. These protean exemplars are pacifist, pro-choice, pro-gay and pro-lesbian, feminist, socialist, and so forth.

The political ideology of these protean selves grows out of a shared worldview that can best be described as expressive and utilitarian individualism. These are the terms used by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) in their now famous book *Habits of the Heart* to describe the dominant ideology of white, middle-class America. The goal of expressive individualists is to express their inner identity to the fullest. They seek to break through the confines of society in their quest for a life rich in emotional, sensual and intellectual experiences. The goal of utilitarian individualists is to maximize their interests. They regard society as an arena in which they should be free to pursue their interests with minimum interference from other people. According to Bellah et al., elements of both expressive and utilitarian individualism are often combined in people's lives.

Lifton's protean examples display both expressive and utilitarian individualism. Lifton acknowledges that the protean self has a core, a 'modicum of inner continuity' (p. 88). One pronounced aspect of that core is what Bellah et al. would term expressive individualism. Lifton repeatedly describes his examples of protean selves as seeking 'authenticity' (p. 54), 'self-expansion' (p. 65) and 'unbridled self-expression' (p. 66), and as experiencing 'strong' (p. 99) and varied emotions. For example, one protean woman decides what spiritual beliefs appeal to her on the basis of how she experiences them. Her philosophy is captured in her words: 'Okay, I'll see how this feels' (p. 144). To her, truth is determined by 'doing what's right and complete for me' (p. 146). Utilitarian individualism is also a core value among the protean selves. Lifton suggests that for many protean selves 'the cohesiveness of [their] sense of self depends greatly upon evidence of efficacy, of making things happen and achieving personal success' (p. 90). In other words, their core identity is based upon adherence to the principle of utilitarian individualism that emphasizes the pursuit of personal interests.

Liftonian proteanism, with its emphasis upon expressive and utilitarian individualism, is a version of the worldview that Hunter (1991) calls progressivism. This worldview sets the parameters within which protean change can take place. It is protean to change life-style, gender identity or spouse. It is protean to define and redefine one's personal belief system. It is protean to avoid commitments in quest of one's own

goals. For example, one protean woman shies away from the 'responsibility' of becoming a mother because she would rather do what 'she loves to do', which is 'paint banners' and 'do flyers' (p. 121) for her political causes. However, Liftonian proteanism is unlikely to accommodate change that leads one to believe in a supreme, external authority, to see humans as differing categorically in their roles and statuses, to prioritize one's duties to others above one's individual desires, or to support conservative political causes.

It is precisely within these latter parameters that fundamentalists often seek to live and *change*. Numerous studies of fundamentalism (e.g. Ammerman, 1987; Marty & Appleby, 1991, 1993a, 1993b) as well as my own research with 70 adult fundamentalists (sampled from four Baptist churches, all of which self-identify as 'fundamentalist'), leave no doubt that the fundamentalist worldview is different from that of Liftonian proteanism. Lifton's protean ideals of being 'fatherless' (in the sense of having no source of external authority), of reversing gender roles and of creating personal belief systems are unacceptable to fundamentalists. However, this does not automatically entail that fundamentalists are not changeable and fluid within the parameters that they have defined for themselves. Fundamentalists may seek to change their personalities in the sense of changing their characters for the better. For example, one woman I interviewed spoke at length of her struggle to change her deep-seated habit of gossiping about others. Fundamentalists may change their careers. Some fundamentalists decide to be 'homeless'. Thus missionaries, in the words of a pastor included in my sample, are willing to 'go anywhere, bear any burden, and sever any tie'.

Moreover, fundamentalists accept and adapt to uncertainty, which they conceive of as the inevitably limited knowledge and wisdom that humans can have. Fundamentalists take issue with their parents' belief systems, in fact the majority of fundamentalists are not raised as such (Roof & McKinney, 1987).³ Finally, fundamentalists may combine what would seem to be 'odd' elements in their lives. For example, I have interviewed a fundamentalist who was at the forefront of the development of reproductive biotechnology (a technology that can be applied to fetuses, something which fundamentalists generally believe should not be done), as well as a fundamentalist whose work as a statistician helped the government to control the market in agricultural products (fundamentalists are typically against government controls).

Fundamentalists, then, seek and experience change. This change, however, is delineated by the parameters of their worldview, in the same way that Liftonian proteanism turns out to entail change within

particular parameters. It is probably the case that individual variations might be somewhat more extensive in a progressivist rather than an orthodox world—simply because in the world of progressivism rules constraining individual expressions are kept to a minimum. However, change, fluidity, 'odd combinations', adaptation, and so forth take place within both progressivist and orthodox worlds. Lifton's claim that fundamentalists are unprotean is not convincing if protean is taken to mean changeable. His therapeutic assessment that fundamentalists are unadapted and unhealthy overlies a deeper disagreement with the ideology and worldview of fundamentalists. That Lifton is not a neutral presenter of the psychology of fundamentalism is reflected in his at times unusual use of sources on fundamentalism. One example is his conclusion that fundamentalists want to 'obliterate' humor (p. 164). Lifton bases his conclusion entirely upon Salman Rushdie's description of Islamic fundamentalists in the *Satanic Verses*. Yet, Rushdie is hardly a neutral or definitive source of authority on the issue. This is a bit like concluding that liberals are immoral on the basis of a quote by Rush Limbaugh.

Even when relying on ethnographic accounts of fundamentalism, such as Nancy Ammerman's (1987) excellent study of a fundamentalist Baptist congregation, Lifton provides a tendentious reading. Lifton quotes Ammerman's conclusion that fundamentalism provides a 'sheltering canopy' against inward and outward chaos. Ammerman uses Peter Berger's (1967) concept of a canopy to explain how fundamentalism provides its believers with explanations for the state of the world, the way that all people live within their various canopies of beliefs. Ammerman is very careful in weighing both the costs and benefits of living under the fundamentalist canopy (e.g. see her discussion of marriage and divorce). Yet Lifton uses the quote from Ammerman to conclude that the fundamentalist self 'becomes increasingly totalized, ensconced in an all-embracing ideological structure' (p. 168) that threatens to be destructive to self and others. Lifton also quotes Ammerman's observation that fundamentalists believe that 'those who are most faithful to God are singled out by Satan for his worst attacks'. Ammerman explains that to fundamentalists the concept of Satan helps to explain why there is sin and suffering in the world and in their own lives. Satan seeks out those who are saved and righteous and that is why even the faithful suffer. Referring to fundamentalists, Lifton extrapolates from the above quote to conclude that 'when one encounters decency and kindness, one must be vigilant lest these be manifestations of Satan or his agent in the end-time drama, the Anti-Christ' (p. 168). Ammerman never states or implies that a belief in

Satan leads fundamentalists to avoid 'encounters of decency and kindness'.

Lifton does argue that some fundamentalists have protean qualities. He writes of 'protean fundamentalists' (pp. 177–187). Yet the examples given by Lifton do not center so much upon how these individuals have fluid and changeable personalities, but more upon the extent to which they embrace aspects of the progressivist worldview and the political causes underlying Liftonian proteanism. For example, Lifton describes one fundamentalist man as being 'impressively protean in setting up a profit-making business that contributed to overcoming environmental pollution' (p. 171). In this case, proteanism is measured not in terms of being changeable but in terms of supporting a particular political cause. Actually, a fundamentalist might well be concerned with preserving the environment but for different reasons from Lifton's protean examples. Fundamentalists would be unlikely to emphasize that 'the biodiversity that helps sustain our planet reverberates with new intensity in the ecological self, a protean extension of the species self' (p. 219), as do Lifton's proteans. Instead, they would be much more likely to emphasize, in the words of one of my fundamentalist interviewees, that 'we are custodians of the earth'. In their view, the earth is God's creation which humans are obligated not to deface but to revere and preserve.

Lifton's opinion that a concern with the environment must reflect a falling away from fundamentalism may also grow out of his view that fundamentalists are 'other-worldly'. On the basis of the fundamentalist belief in Christ's Second Coming, Lifton concludes that to fundamentalists 'only the subsequent other-worldly events are important' (p. 147)—and thus presumably not the preservation of the environment. Yet it is far from clear that fundamentalists are other-worldly. While fundamentalists are concerned with a future world—both their own salvation and the Second Coming—this does not mean that the present world is not of interest to them. Income levels of fundamentalists are similar to those of non-fundamentalists within the different regions of the country (Ammerman, 1987), indicating that fundamentalists pursue material interests. Not only do fundamentalists pursue material interests, but they uphold it as an ideal to do so as long as the pursuit is in line with biblical injunctions.

Furthermore, fundamentalists in my interviews often described life and nature as 'precious' and 'sacred', because they believe them to be God's creations. Finally, fundamentalists are certainly not other-worldly in the sense of being uninterested in political matters, though, as pointed out by other observers, political activism is and tradition-

ally has been approached with some ambivalence by fundamentalists (Ammerman, 1987). Lifton's conclusion that fundamentalists are other-worldly (along with the numerous psychological ills he sees as attending other-worldliness) thus seems unjustified.

In conclusion, Lifton does not make a convincing case that the fundamentalist self is not protean, but it is clear that the fundamentalist self is not progressivist in Hunter's sense of the word. Lifton's use of psychological concepts to portray the fundamentalist self as out of the mainstream and potentially dangerous is in part reflective of a progressivist perspective. Progressivists render judgment by reference to that which is human rather than divine (such as by scientific concepts; Hunter, 1991). Thus, the language of therapy and psychology often serves the purpose of passing moral judgment for the progressivist/Liftonian protean, the way that the language of faith serves that purpose for the orthodox/fundamentalist. In the social sciences where the therapeutic language is common and fundamentalism (in the orthodox sense) is rare, we might do well to acknowledge our own ideological assumptions. Otherwise psychology risks taking on the tone of buttons sold in college-town stores.

Notes

1. While Hunter focuses on the culture wars taking place in the United States, the recently published and ongoing series of encyclopedic books on 'fundamentalisms', edited by Marty and Appleby (1991, 1993a, 1993b), suggests that the culture wars that Hunter documents in the United States resemble wars (fought with both words and weapons) taking place in many parts of the world.
2. It should be noted that Hunter does not draw an absolute distinction between orthodox and progressivist groups. For example, there are groups that combine elements of both sides (conservative secularists, socialist fundamentalists), people who find themselves to be somewhere in the middle, and separatists who will cooperate with neither side.
3. Lifton cites a statistic that about half of the people who grow up fundamentalist do not remain fundamentalist, but he does not mention that among religious groups conservative Protestants (including fundamentalists) are among the few that have had a net gain in acquiring new members (Roof & McKinney, 1987, based on surveys conducted between 1972 and 1984).

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Biography

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