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One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left, and Each Other

Nashua Kalil

In the midst of an identity crisis and morality tug-of-war, intellectuals on the far ends of the socio-political spectrum have declared the country to be in the midst of a “culture war.” Public opinion polls asserted the existence of deep cultural divisions that threaten the future of the nation as a democratic society. But what do everyday Americans think about these critical topics? In the current turmoil of the political landscape, there exists a compelling need to reassess what common values inform American identity and join us as a nation.

America has always defined itself as middle-class, an essential state of mind connected to national identity. The enduring morality and cultural beliefs associated with this self-identified group are of the utmost importance to those engaged in public service. Planning professionals are guided by their mission to serve the public, taught methods for profiling demographics and identifying stakeholders, yet the larger values and beliefs guiding the decision-making dynamics of public planning are hardly ever clear. The profession is often polarized between advocacy of the least represented in the process (and society) and the seemingly neutral provision of technical information for use by elected politicians.

In an effort to be fair and objective within the largest scale of reference, planners, as do other public service professions, have come to rely upon conventional wisdom about the society we serve. While seeking to balance public and private interests, the greatest good is typically defined as providing the most benefits to the largest number of people; a democratic middle ground built around a presupposed majority consensus. Greater knowledge of who constitutes middle-class society, and what those who define themselves as such believe, is definitely the concern of urban planning.

The cultural implications of technical planning decisions have been an historical topic of concern since the negative effects of urban renewal were first discerned and discussed by a host of scholars and social critics in the 1960s and 1970s. As participatory

planning became the new basis for democratic process, laws requiring public input and consideration of values have tended to create a localizing effect. If the planner's role as public servant is to recapture its importance as enlightened advisor for mediating public policy decisions and reinvigorating civic participation in the planning process, research investigating general agreements and potential schisms in public beliefs and cultural values must be made available.

Alan Wolfe, professor of Sociology and Political Science at Boston University, has written an immensely valuable book probing the definitions and thoughts of middle-class Americans about their beliefs, hopes, and concerns. He has accomplished this in a manner designed to illuminate the differences between real life and conventional wisdom surrounding the idea of a culture war dividing us along lines of race, religion, sexuality, immigration, governance, and public welfare. The book's title makes obvious the breadth of this inquiry.

Wolfe was prompted to initiate this research, dubbed the "Middle Class Morality Project," after hearing vitriolic speeches by political conservatives like Patrick Buchanan referring to a political battle aimed at winning the culture war. The stated goal of Wolfe's work was to take the pulse of American society through its ultimate expression, the middle-class, and determine whether this cultural divide truly exists, and if so, along what lines. The basic questions he presents are always bounded by an examination of how individuals constitute their identity as middle-class Americans and what they believe this means in public decision-making.

There are several aspects of Wolfe's research that make this book valuable for urban planners: first, the clarification of arguments constituting the culture war related to large social goals; second, expanded definitions of middle-class American moral and cultural beliefs; and third, an increased understanding of American views of government, roles of participation, and confidence in the public servants of whom planners are a part. This latter investigation is especially important, as public planners often become lightning rods for people's frustration with government in general.

The book is highly readable, working through a series of 200 interviews with subjects from several communities representing the spectrum of regional identity. Wolfe leads us through his selection process, finally choosing eight suburban communities including Brookline and Medford in Massachusetts, Southeast DeKalb County in Georgia, Broken Arrow and San Springs in Oklahoma,

and finally, Rancho Bernardo and Eastlake in California. Each interviewee was asked a number of questions designed to reveal potential differences in belief and uncover the sociological underpinnings to those beliefs. Wolfe takes great pains to explain his research methods in a succinct, clear manner. This in itself makes the book singular in that it reveals an academic explaining research methods with such transparent elegance that anyone, not just other academics, can partake of and believe in its findings.

The author not only explains his particular research methods in this manner, but also coherently describes the caveats of any empirical quantification of cultural values in research and problems of researcher biases, offering advice to those pursuing similar studies. However useful to politics, public opinion polls are flawed tools for qualitative research. Wolfe carefully examines the tendency for people to frame limited answers to survey questions about emotionally charged moral questions. How a researcher asks and then qualifies complicated questions matters a great deal in survey work. A critical issue for review is whether 200 subjects is statistically valid for the representation of almost 200 million people deeming themselves the American Middle Class, however carefully chosen. A larger sampling would provide a more accurate barometer and raise the study's findings to a higher statistical confidence level for predictive purposes.

With a palpable sense of relief, Professor Wolfe's investigation into the societal psyche of middle-America concludes with surprising truths about who we are as a society: despite critical differences in personal political beliefs across the spectrum of the country, ultimately the majority of Americans are morally tolerant, personally optimistic, and generous of heart. At the same time, he finds there is an underlying disengagement from the democratic, public service ideals that bolster the foundation of American society through participatory governance. From a planning point of view, this is a chilling finding. According to the results presented here, middle-class Americans feel deeply estranged from political processes and uniformly distrust the system as representing their moral beliefs.

In answer to the question if a culture war truly exists in America, Professor Wolfe has explained: "I think the culture war is something that took place among intellectuals, the politically active interest groups that need to scare people to raise funds, whether

from the left or right.”¹ Though there are many who would disagree on whether the conflict is a ground war among middle-Americans, his findings support the view that most Americans are reasonable and tolerant of others who have profound differences of belief.

I highly recommend this book for its in-depth analysis of public sentiment, discussions of research methods, and considerations of cultural conflict and governance among what is arguably the majority of Americans. It allows a rare feeling of being aware of and awake to the center, empowered and reinvigorated in our search to provide the greatest good to the most people as urban planners. Values, morality, and cultural convictions will always be the province of planning. It is my hope we take the discussion to the next level and address the conflicts between economic classes, where the real culture wars may most inexorably exist.

References

- Wolfe, Alan. 1998. *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About, God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left, and Each Other*. New York: Viking.

¹ Quotes from Alan Wolfe are taken from National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*, March 4, 1998.