

The two things that get people most excited in cultural conflicts are religion and sex

Many people still believe that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were not just acts of political terrorism, but part of a cultural war, a clash of civilizations. The two things that get people most excited in cultural conflicts are religion and sex, specifically the way that men treat women. They are of course intimately linked: religion is commonly used as a way to regulate sexual behavior and relations between the sexes.

The cultural interpretation of 9/11 as a civilizational clash explains why a number of former leftists have joined conservatives in their hostility to Islam. In the past, most American leftists would have regarded the war in Afghanistan as a neo-imperialist venture. But, since 9/11, the tone has changed. The Taliban subjugated women, stopped them from being educated, and kept them wrapped in burqas. So a war against the Taliban and their guest, Osama bin Laden, could be construed as a war for female liberation.

It is, in fact, unlikely that feminism played any role in President George W. Bush's decision to take the United States to war. But cultural concerns allowed him to recruit quite a few unlikely allies.

The response to 9/11 and to Dominique Strauss-Kahn's recent encounter with an African chambermaid in a New York hotel have very little in common, except for one thing: once again, cultural conflict was invoked in a misleading way.

Whatever happened between the former managing director of the International Monetary Fund and his accuser, the fact that he was arrested and paraded in front of the press as a criminal suspect has been much criticized in France. One allegation, made recently by a well-known French publicist, is that the arrest was typical of American puritanism. The French, he alleged, being from a Latin culture, have a more liberal understanding of sexual behavior. They are more tolerant of human frailties, and have a more refined appreciation of the art of seduction.

More than that, the arrest of DSK was supposedly revenge for France's protection of another man accused of sexual crimes, Roman Polanski, and for the French ban on the burqa. In other

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words, the DSK case was part of another clash of cultures over sex, and, if only tangentially, religion.

One problem with the cultural argument is that it is often used to defend or excuse the behavior of the powerful against the weak. Taliban men no doubt believe that the subjugation of women is a cultural privilege, as well as a religious duty. Authoritarian leaders in Asia routinely claim that their countries are culturally unsuited to democracy.

But even in the more liberal West – let alone in countries with less liberal traditions, such as Japan – culture comes to the rescue of the powerful more often than it protects the weak. Both Polanski and DSK were engaged in sexual activities with women who were far from being their equals, in age and social status, respectively. Understanding their “human frailties,” then, comes down to excusing the behavior of powerful men towards women with no power at all.

The rather strict use of law in the US to regulate sexual behavior might reflect a puritanical culture, but it is more likely the result of cultural diversity. In a society of immigrants, people come from a wide variety of traditions and faiths, with very different views of sex and the treatment of women. Since Americans can't rely on homogeneous mores, the law is the only way to regulate behavior. Old societies have customs and traditions; new ones have courts and legislatures.

But that is not the whole answer, either. Sweden, a country of limited cultural diversity, has even more stringent laws on sexual behavior than the US. And France, beneath its veneer of republican equality, is culturally and ethnically diverse.

One cannot expect the law to solve all cultural conflicts. But it can play a positive role as a tool of emancipation. At best, the law is a great equalizer. The end of the Western slave trade did not come because European culture changed, but because the British changed their laws.

In Japan, sexual harassment of women has sometimes been excused (by Japanese males) to foreigners as part of Japanese culture. And the female victims often put up with it by thinking that this is true. No doubt many Afghan women in burqas are equally convinced that covering their faces is a cultural command – and therefore a natural duty.

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But more and more Japanese women are fighting back against unwelcome male attention, not by denying tradition or culture, but by going to a lawyer and suing. Their problem is not with sex, or the art of seduction, but with the abuse of power.

Muslim women in strict authoritarian societies do not usually have the option of seeking the law's protection. Men who wish to maintain their control over women will no doubt continue to use culture and religious tradition to justify their dominance.

It would no doubt be better, especially for women, if the citizens of countries like Afghanistan were equal before the law. Likewise, it would be better if powerful Frenchmen were to stop using "Latin culture" as an excuse for abusing their social inferiors.

But the solutions to these problems are political and legal. That is why DSK was arrested. As for women in Muslim countries, there may not be much that people in the West can do to improve their lot. But it is unlikely that much good will come from bombing them.

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