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Cultural wars, not jobs, play a large role in this election

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

Pretend for a moment that your world was flipped over. Everything you thought right was wrong, all the threads of a civil society seemed frayed and no one appeared to notice or care. You'd be a little scared and very angry -- and you probably wouldn't know just who to blame.

That, I think, is what's behind the undying persistence of culture wars in American elections. This one was supposed to be about jobs, but right now, it has shifted unexpectedly toward cultural battles: values, family and the moral fiber of a nation. Progressives scratch their heads and wonder why, in a country struggling to get back on its economic feet, these issues boil to the top, especially among working-class and middle-class families so hard-hit by hard times.

Just glance back at the lead paragraph for a second: I said "pretend" your world had flipped -- but the culture wars won't go away because, for too many people, it's not about pretending at all. The front page of *The New York Times* made it startlingly clear: Unwed mothers are now a majority among mothers younger than age 30, and the most rapid growth has been among white women in their 20s.

Add this to that: *Coming Apart*, the latest controversial book by sociologist Charles Murray, is subtitled "The State of White America, 1960-2010." Murray focuses on what has happened to whites on the lower social rungs, and it is a picture of a slow but unstoppable breakdown in the last 50 years.

He uses the blue-collar burg of Fishtown, Pa., as a stand-in for the rest of the nation. This is from a review in the *Los Angeles Times*:

Murray reveals alarming levels of social isolation and disengagement among Fishtown's working-class whites. By the early 2000s, only 48% were married, down from 84% in 1960; children living in households with both biological parents fell from 96% to 37%; the number of disabled

quintupled from 2% to 10%; arrest rates for violent crime quadrupled from 125 to 592 per 100,000 people; and the percent attending church only once a year nearly doubled from 35% to 59%. In 2008, almost 12% of prime-age males with a high school diploma were "not in the labor force" -- quadruple the percentage from the all-time low of 3% in 1968.

Murray asserts that all this is happening in the midst of widening social (not just economic) gap between the haves and have-nots. Elites are fully unaware of what is really going on in troubled cities and towns because the elites are so removed from them by superior education and walled-in suburban communities, to name a few factors.

Imagine you are someone from a place like Fishtown, and you've watched as something close to social chaos has emerged all around you over the last two generations. Hard-and-fast truths like church, marriage, intact families and simple civil behavior are all on sharp decline where you live, and there seems to be no way out. Government doesn't help (your schools are lousy and everyone in town knows it; you know too many people gaming the safety net system; etc.) so taxes are a form of theft from your pocket and politicians are the crooks looking out for themselves and their friends who live in the better places, the ones with the gates and the guards.

Sure, there are economic reasons for all of this -- for example, factories have moved away and nothing has come in to replace them. But those macro answers sound like excuses when too many people on your street keep making the same bad choices, and their kids grow up to do the same.

The answer, you know in your gut, has nothing to do with minimum wage or job retraining classes. It is deeper -- it feels like something that has afflicted the soul of the culture around you.

Sounds like fuel for the culture war engine -- and when you put it this way, with these statistics and the sad stories behind them, it doesn't sound unreasonable, not at all. It sounds like people are angry that real issues in their real lives aren't being addressed and haven't been addressed for more than four decades.

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No one, it seems, will listen -- unless you yell.

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