

Does Progress Destroy Culture?

Guest editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 14, 2013

Recently I served on a panel contemplating a provocative question: does progress destroy culture? Organized by Tulane University's Hillel Center as part of its "Big Issues" series, the discussion made for an engaging evening.

Among the issues tabled by moderator Nick Spitzer, and batted around by panelists and attendees, were conflicts between musicians and residents, between working-class neighbors and middle-class transplants, between local distinctiveness and national assimilation, and between the production of culture and its touristic consumption. Interlacing throughout were issues of race, class, nativity, crime, education, jobs, authenticity, and exactly what we meant by "progress" and "culture."

Big issues indeed—and judging from the overflow audience, many seemed to feel that a new era was upon us. The post-Katrina recovery had given way to a rather unexpected revival, which brought with it welcome economic rigor—as well as thousands of newcomers with external perspectives and outsider agendas. Antagonisms and conflicts have since arisen, leading to worries about the future. Will the New Orleans we know and love, with all its quirky idiosyncrasies, survive? Or are we at a sort of historical and cultural endpoint, when local ways will be finally subsumed into a larger homogenization? Does progress, in other words, destroy culture?

Looking to the past helps address this question. New Orleans two centuries ago underwent a transformation so draconian that today's changes practically evaporate in comparison. Starting a few years after the Louisiana Purchase, migrants from the Northeast and Upper South poured in by the thousands. On their heels came immigrants from Ireland, greater Germany, France, Haiti, and dozens of other nations, who arrived in numbers larger than any other Southern city and oftentimes second only to New York. By 1850, more than two out of every four New Orleanians had been born outside the United States, and nearly three out of every four had been born outside New Orleans.

As the city's population doubled roughly every fifteen years, its culture roiled and diversified tumultuously. The city's primary language shifted from French to English, and its predominant race went from black to white. Its Spanish-influenced Roman civil code became mixed with English common law. Its chief religion increasingly shared the spiritual stage with other sects and creeds. Its West Indian-style architecture became Americanized with center hallways and Classical façades introduced from Europe via the Northeast. Its night scene adopted the "concert saloon," a variation of the English music hall imported from New York that would later evolve into vaudeville venues and burlesque night clubs. Its festivity, in the form of Mardi Gras, transformed from decentralized street mayhem, to organized krewes with scheduled parades. Its view of race veered away from the old Caribbean model that included an intermediary caste of free people of color, in favor of the American "one drop" rule. Even Louisiana's surveying system changed, from French long-lots measured in arpents to American rectangular sections measured in acres.

Like today, every change was met with consternation and resistance. Creoles—that is, native New Orleanians—viewed the newcomers as brash and threatening to their once-tight grip on local politics, economics, and culture. The newcomers, for their part, adopted some local ways but otherwise made no apologies for installing their own "superior" way of life. Acrimony mounted, getting so bad by the

1830s that New Orleans underwent a sort of metropolitan divorce, trifurcating into rival municipalities delineated largely along lines of ethnicity and nativity. Talk about heavy-handed conflict resolution: imagine New Orleans today breaking into three cities, with downtown transplants pitted against uptown bluebloods and Gentilly Creoles, each with its own council, laws, and police!

Local culture, in sum, transformed radically during the nineteenth century, as it blended with emerging American society and progressed into something greater than the sum of its parts. As it did, the inefficient tri-municipality system, which one editorialist criticized as the best means ever devised “to create a war of races, to make distinction between Creole and American,” was finally abandoned.

But that did not prevent the reunited city from feeling just as threatened when, after the Civil War, emancipated African Americans arrived in large numbers, followed by thousands of Southern and Eastern European immigrants—all of whom brought *their* culture baggage and transformed *their* corners of local society.

So too the incoming workers during the world wars, the Hispanic immigrants and Vietnamese refugees later in the twentieth century, and the post-Katrina entrepreneurs and gentrifiers of today. Each was viewed by some to threaten local culture, whereas in actuality each laid the groundwork for what we would later perceive to *constitute* local culture.

I offer this historical perspective not to trivialize the recent discord over issues such as live music, street culture, food trucks, second-line parades, and gentrification; real lifestyles and real livelihoods are really at stake here. Rather, it’s to remind that such changes and conflicts have happened before, in far greater magnitude, and that we should expect flashpoints to occur when a diverse democracy resides in close urban proximity. It’s not a sign of a broken system in a declining culture; it’s the sign of a working system in a vibrant culture.

As for our “Big Issue,” I suggest that progress does not destroy culture; on the contrary, it breathes new life into it. Culture is ever-experimenting, evolving, discarding, borrowing and inventing. It’s in a state that a physicist might call “dynamic” rather than “static equilibrium.” Static equilibrium is what keeps a chair upright. Dynamic equilibrium is what keeps a moving bicycle upright. A moving bike stands up *because* it’s making progress, not despite it; it only falls down when it stops. So too, I believe, culture.

We have two centuries of evidence demonstrating that the progress and conflict currently dominating headlines not only do not threaten the culture of New Orleans, but rather promise to enrich it.

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