

## REVIEW ESSAY:

*Inventing Modern America*, 8 television shows. Producer: Steen Johansen, Danish Educational Broadcasting Dept., Danmarks Radio. Jan/Feb. 1989

*Inventing Modern America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Åbent Universitet, 1988. 112 pp.

*American Studies: A Source Book*, ed. David Nye, Carl Pedersen, Niels Thorsen. Akademisk forlag, 1989, 257 pp.

# Inventing Modern America. An Open University Project

**Robert F. Sayre**

University of Iowa

As an American exchange professor in Copenhagen, reading these two books and teaching from them during the Spring of 1989 has been a very instructive experience. It has also been at times a melancholy one, but one that I shall long remember as marking a turning point in my views of the United States and, possibly, in the ways both Americans and Europeans study it. These books, along with the eight television and radio programs that were produced to go with them, comprise the first post-Reagan, television-age European approach to American culture.

I will begin with the melancholy, with some of the gloomy conditions that are noted in *Inventing Modern America*.

One third of adult Americans are "already illiterate to the degree that they find it impossible to read many messages and warnings that modern life takes for granted" (p. 109). "From 1965 to 1975, the median income of black families rose from 54% to 61% of the white level." But by 1984, black family income had "dropped to 56% of that of whites" (p. 72). "The average American has the TV set turned on seven hours a day, about two times the average in Europe. Students who have finished high school have spent less than 12,000 hours with their teachers and more than 22,000 hours watching television" (pp. 15–6). Americans are a rootless people ("thirty-nine million people move every year...," or about one-sixth of the population [p. 30]) who have no idea of their real history, since everything from historical villages like Plymouth and Old Sturbridge to television spectacles like the rededication of

the Statue of Liberty mainly promote myths and nostalgia. A recent development in America is "the proliferation of closed communities that employ elaborate security systems and screening of new tenants" (p. 40). This "siege mentality" is also illustrated in the fact that "for many Americans" "the inhabitants of the ghettos, Afro-Americans, black Caribbeans, and Puerto Ricans, are transformed into modern savages" (p. 41). "Since 1980 the absolute number of poor has increased by three to five million people, depending upon how poverty is defined.. ." [p. 49]. Another illustration of the power of television is that in 1950 only 9% of American homes had television, where it was watched 4.6 hours a day. "By 1960 87% had television, and they watched it more than five hours a day" (p. 54). Political rituals in America, which used to be local, like torchlight parades and 4th of July picnics, have now become nationally organized television spectacles which "attempt to supplement voting with modern or late-modern forms of legitimation." These new rituals also "attempt to unburden citizens of their sense of responsibility for the developments of a politics of state power which they have come to see as deeply problematic" (p. 98).

The common theme or agent behind many of these points is television. Television is America's major entertainment, its major source of news, the possible villain behind American illiteracy, the force that is centralizing American politics, and the force that American leaders now depend upon for ruling the American people. And this is the major reason, I am sure, why the writers and editors of these books designed them to go along with the eight 50-minute programs that were broadcast on Channel 1 of Danish TV during the winter of 1989, when the books were published. The Open University course, "An Introduction to American Studies," was a television-era way of both extending Danish education and investigating the United States.

Thus it is really impossible to review these books without also summarizing the TV programs that parallel them.

The first, on American politics, boldly combines an introduction to American history and government with an introduction to American television as a new arm of government, rivalling Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency. Except, as the program shows, television and government are allies as well as rivals, with values and priorities that are closely related. Television frames political reality, putting the nightly news into contexts, defining the causes, nature, and limits of issues, and setting agendas. As an example the program shows footage from the ABC report in May, 1985, on the bombing of the MOVE headquarters by the Philadelphia police. It then interviews an American professor who wrote a critique of the TV coverage, and gives an appraisal of how television networks must compete for their audiences, deliver them to the sponsors as consumers, and so not excessively alarm them. Thus the report presented the shoot-out, bombing, and subsequent

inferno as horrible and frightening but concluded that it was an aberration (MOVE was "a tiny, bizarre cult whose members wear Rastafarian hairdos," said the reporter) and that in Philadelphia, "William Penn's City of Brotherly Love," a riot had not happened and the homeless were being cared for. Such messages of combined terror and reassurance also come, over television, from the president, for he is useful to it as the symbol of national power, stability, and pride. This role, the program and textbook explain, was masterfully handled by Ronald Reagan, who, in turn, used television to increase enormously the power of the Presidency, at the expense of Congress and the political parties. But overall, President and television together have come to transmit the images of the United States as a superpower, tying together military power, science and technology, and the economic power of giant corporations. Television, the program concludes, has brought about the triumph of Hamiltonian federalism.

The next two programs, corresponding to chapters two and three of the textbook, "Land of New Beginnings" and "Inventing American Space," are not so bold. Their material is the story of immigration and westward expansion, and it is illustrated with blow-ups and pans of old engravings and photographs, some footage from modern historical villages (the same ones criticized as reflecting an idealized past), and some shots of legal and illegal immigrant today. The interviews with various American scholar-commentators are sometimes too long, and the rest often seems like a travelogue. There is also fundamental difficulty in defining "space." At some times it means wilderness, at others the man-made landscape, and at still others an ideological space, such as that of early feminists with new concepts of the public and private realms. Perhaps this simply reflects our television-age ambiguity or uncertainty about space. We don't know what "space" on TV is, despite all TV's talk about it.

The fourth program, "Is There a Typical American?" returns to the closer study of American television. It mixes interviews of citizens and sociologists, asking them, Are you typical... what is typical? etc., with scenes from quite a number of soap operas and sitcoms, contrasting the image of the American as lonely and perplexed by divorce, drugs, and crime (the soap) and as a member of a happy but screwy family where each night's problem finally turns out to be just one of communication (the sitcom). With cuts from the "Cosby Show" it also shows how a black family is now within the frame of the "typical." But more instructive, somehow, is the contrast between the scholars and citizens, who are rather self-conscious about the interviews, awkward, and nailed to their seats, and the skilled, expressive actors who portray the "typical" American on TV. Still, says the narrator, most Americans know that the figures on TV do not represent their own lives. They know, too, that the

"typical American" is a fiction, but that they need these images to unify, celebrate, and interpret themselves.

The next two programs, on Black Political Culture and America in the 1960s, make a pair. The first focusses on the Civil Rights struggle. The second focuses on the anti-war movement and university rebellion which were at first modeled on the Black movement. Yet the programs clearly show the differences. Black Southerners, with their history of slavery and oppression, used the courts and the federal government to gain their first victories over segregation and to establish the legal basis for equal rights. The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 then made the black churches the organizers of the protests. The ensuing sit-ins and freedom rides were spontaneous, local uprisings, but they too were highly disciplined and appealed to national public opinion, through which they again received federal support—intervention by federal troops or marshalls and new civil rights legislation. The TV pictures which we see are, largely, the very ones which gained that sympathy: people in Montgomery carpools, students at lunch-counters, the police dogs and the fire hoses of Birmingham.

The "New Sensibilities" shown next are mainly Northern and middle-class. The program shows a few images of the beat generation, Timothy Leary, the drug culture, and campus protests. But these white movements lacked an ideology, says Sheldon Wolin, a professor of political theory from the University of California, Berkeley, and they did not have a broad national support. Thus in 1968 Nixon could—by means of television—appeal to or invent a "Silent Majority" opposed to them. Then, following events like the Kent State shootings of 1970, the counter-culture broke up. At the end of the program Frank Zappa insistently repeats to the Danish interviewer, "There never was a revolution. The 'people' turned into Yuppies."

But the gloomiest program, for the changes it shows in our culture, may be the seventh, on "Political Rituals in America." It opens with shots of amateurish local bands in a neighborly parade, followed by newsreels of Lindbergh's ticker-tape parade in New York, while the narrator says that historically the patriotic rituals in America have been local and the great national celebrations popular and not centered on the presidency or the federal government. But in 1976, the bicentennial became a "media event," and the rest of the program is mainly TV footage of other patriotic "media events": the rededication of the Statue of Liberty in 1986, triumphs and tragedies of the Space Program, presidential nominating conventions and inaugurations. All these, the narrator explains, promote national leadership and remove the citizen as a responsible participant. As a result, says Sheldon Wolin, the white-haired *eminence gris* of the series, the substance of the events celebrated is forgotten. The rituals are "hollowed out." The program perfectly illustrates what Wolin said in the very first program that the U.S. today is more like a

European nation state, a country with a very clear distinction between the rulers and the ruled.

The last program, "Re-Inventing America," surveys the problems of America today: the worries that Americans have about the nation's declining power, the Iran-Contra scandal, the decay of cities in the old industrial Northeast, the poverty of one-fourth of the population of New York, the dominance of European and Japanese imports, crime. Yet TV, as characterized by Wolin, is again a prominent recorder and agent. Increasingly, he says, TV emphasizes economic categories and forces like trade balances, deficits, and investment as determining America's destiny. This depoliticizes public life and portrays the sense of the United States as a mega-state in which military and economic issues dictate public policy. Finally, TV itself tends to paralyze the will of the viewers. They are subjected every night to a "heavy world" in which the individual has little power. Their only relief is the short spot in the middle or at the end of the news about some one winning a lottery or a baby recovered from a well—a bit of sentiment or humor for momentary cheer.

In defence of my country I need to say that there are still many positive features of America today that do not get mentioned. Affirmative action programs in universities, government, and business have done a lot to promote greater equality of employment between men and women and whites and minorities. The environmental movement is very strong, and its various branches and membership organizations have effective local leaders, projects, and bases of support. During the Reagan administration environmental, feminist, and civil rights organizations repeatedly proved their power. They blocked reactionary legislation and defeated conservative nominees to the Supreme Court. Grass-roots democracy and its natural form of celebration in 4th of July picnics, civic parades, voter-registration drives, and community fairs and festivals is not dead. Nor has it lost entirely to national "media events."

That these forces and activities are not prominent in "Inventing Modern America" stems, in part, from the very conditions of television which the programs explore. Being local, they rarely get on national television, and so the Danish makers of this program, who seem to have obtained their footage of American TV programs mainly from the networks, simply did not have tapes of them. It was easy, I presume, to get clips of Ronald and Nancy Reagan standing like movie stars before the Statue of Liberty, with a fortune in fireworks blowing up behind them. But a small-town fireworks display or the re-opening of a local historic building, which was the focus of most bicentennial celebrations in 1976, was not available.

This leads me to another exception to the series and to these books—they are to a large extent framed by the contexts and points of reference which the Danish audience already has. Thus one tendency is to dwell on or return to

the visual images the audience already knows, moments like Kennedy's assassination, King's "I Have a Dream" speech, or Reagan at a nomination or inauguration. And a second (related) tendency is to work from the ideological image the audience already has, such as images of the U.S. as big and powerful but also vain, super-patriotic, puritanical, and **uncultured**. One of the more interesting moments in class discussion of this image came when I observed that Danes were great flag-wavers too, after which a student said she thought both Danes and Americans were too patriotic! Another day, when I broke from the textbooks and showed slides of Edward Hopper paintings, the students were amazed. They not only liked him, they hadn't known there were such Americans. Painters? Landscapes like *these*?

Yet my melancholy is also a result, after a very healthy, happy, and peaceful year here, of having begun to see the U.S. partially through Danish eyes myself. And I don't like what I see.

The "America" which previously I had "invented" (if I can be so bold) was a much more intelligent, self-critical, and sensitive America. It was an America of Emersonian optimism and faith in common people, balanced by Melvillean pessimism and conflicting attitudes towards authority. The Americans I spent most time with were, in a real sense, the writers I have read and written about and the college students I have taught them to. I watch TV less than three hours a week, generally just for a ball game or movie, and I seldom watched Ronald Reagan spectacles. Though he had a momentary charm, a glibness that was sometimes amusing and an earnestness that was bewitching, his appearance on TV always looked crooked: the clothes of a well-dressed galoot, the voice of a slick salesman, and the ideas of Huck Finn's Pap meanly ranting and raving about Big Government. I was also skeptical of what Americanists call Popular Culture Studies. Too many people in the field were so uncritical of it that they ended up in love with it. I prefer to study a culture much more selectively and, ultimately, to learn from it and acquire it, or reject or change it, not just spin theories about it.

But the Danish Americanists, being primarily Danes, take a much more analytical and comprehensive approach to American culture. They look at the high and the low, the political and the literary, and almost everything in between. This is perhaps best illustrated in *American Studies: A Source Book*. Its 48 selections range from The Declaration of Independence to a once-secret National Security Council document of 1950 outlining Cold War strategy. It has nuggets from Whitman and Thoreau; it has presidential speeches and sociological essays—an amazing hodge-podge. But its six sections, with titles like "Creating New Notions of Power" and "Inventing American Space," relate to most of the topics in the textbook and TV series, and they also enable a teacher to illustrate various themes in American politics and society. I had some good classes in which we compared different selections. Their greater

value to me personally, however, was in forcing me to take a wider view of American society: to look at a much broader variety of documents and see some new themes and trends.

One particular revelation came from comparing a speech of Franklin D. Roosevelt's in 1932 with Kennedy's and Reagan's inauguration speeches of 1960 and 1980. For where Roosevelt's speech was a sensitive inquiry into the responsibilities of government (to restore "equality of opportunity," to control "economic oligarchy," to distribute purchasing power "throughout every group in the Nation"), both Kennedy and Reagan emphatically asked for sacrifices from the people to the government. "...Ask not what your county can do for you: Ask what you can do for your country." Reagan, looking across to Arlington Cemetery, read from the diary of a World War I soldier who vowed to make any "sacrifice" to win the war. "The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow [made]," Reagan quickly reassured the nation. But he had still made the soldier the example. Government was not to serve the people; it was for the people to die for.

What allowed, or seemed to compel Kennedy and Reagan to call for sacrifices was, of course, the atmosphere of the Cold War, which, naturally, was recognized often in both speeches. It is war that inverts the relation of government to individual from one where government primarily serves to one where it has to be served. "War is the health of the State," in Randolph Bourne's forgotten words.

Admittedly, other factors could be used to explain this dramatic contrast between Roosevelt's emphasis on benign government and Kennedy's and Reagan's on benign (or supine) individuals. But the point I want to make is that for forty years the United States has been profoundly shaped (and scarred) in more ways than we have even started to realize by the Cold War. Cold War in politics, in public language (which inevitably affects private language), in the frames of media priorities, contexts and reference points. Cold War in economic choices and federal budgets, in foreign policies, anti-communism, and the creation of a military-industrial complex. And Cold War in popular films and television entertainment, where year after year in one form or another violence has been a box-office favorite and winner in the ratings. Cold War diplomacy even underlay the State Department's original encouragement of the American Studies movement abroad.

To their credit, the Danes and Americans who produced this course had no interest in any such continued propagandizing. Instead, their texts and TV shows are a stunning example of what can be done when people in another country independently interpret America, and Americans now need these foreign perspectives more than ever. They need new analytic studies of politics and society such as de Tocqueville's, critics of manners and morals like Mrs. Trollope and Dickens, critics of literature like D. H. Lawrence, and

counsellors on race and social problems like Gunnar Myrdal. One of the best surprises in the *Source Book*, in fact, is a short piece on "Mexico and the United States" by Octavio Paz. And these new foreign traveler-critics need to come with tape-recorders and video cameras as well as notebooks and paint brushes, to make programs like this which Americans can see on their own TV sets. I am not thinking of series like "Alistair Cooke's America." It was too establishmentarian, too focussed on the epic of the American past, and too tailored to the American audience. Wherever Cooke's cameras went, they always came back to him, a genial British uncle sitting in an elegant library and beaming with reassurance. "Inventing Modern America" is less finished, but it is much more thought-provoking and, all around, much better.

But one of the other things that European and American professors of American Studies need to do, individually and jointly, is to give much more attention to the damage that the Cold War has inflicted on America and its people. The oxymoron *cold war* has somehow hindered us from seeing that "cold" or not it has still done the economic, political, and social damage of a war. Americans *have* made wartime sacrifices—in diminished social programs, deferred up-keep of their public facilities and services, over-allocation of wealth and resources to weaponry, and many other ways too numerous to mention. America, as Seymour Melman wrote twenty years ago, is a "depleted society," and war is the reason. The rusting bridges and run-down railroads have not been bombed by enemy planes. They have been knocked out by Cold War neglect.

"As America nears the year 2000," *Inventing Modern America* ends, "it will in large part be shaped by the lasting contradictions of American culture. It will aspire to keep alive the pastoral dream of union with nature while embracing the latest technologies. It will attempt to embrace human variety as immigrants pour in and yet strive to define a common self. It will see itself as a mighty world power and at the same time imagine itself as a nation on the verge of ruin, in a state of siege."

Quite possibly. A terrifying prophecy, but one which is hard at the moment to dispute. And opposite this paragraph is a full-page picture of "Herding cattle with a helicopter"—a lean, leather-faced cowboy in boots and ten-gallon hat silhouetted against the sun-lit bubble of his futuristic machine. But America has not always imagined itself in a state of siege. Despite the fondness of Americans for apocalyptic visions and jeremiads picturing the country on the road to ruin and damnation, the siege mentality is, like the helicopter, a product of the Cold War. With this 40-year period in world history now, hopefully, ending, the time has come to review the damage and assess the condition of the society. *Inventing Modern America*, its source book, and the eight-part television series make a grand Danish-American beginning.