

Hans Lofgren and Alan Shima (eds), *After Consensus: Critical Challenge and Social Change in America*, Gothenberg Studies in English 72. Gothenberg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1998. 224 pp., ISBN: 91-7346-335-3; SEK 180 paper.

This collection of essays has been selected from the eighty or so plenary lectures and workshop papers presented at the fifteenth biennial Nordic Association for American

Studies conference, held at Gothenberg University, Sweden, over five beautifully sunny days in August, 1997. Appropriately, it ranges far and wide in terms of its subject matter: from foreign policy to art, from law to drama, and from cultural theory to film, with papers on sociolinguistics, the welfare state, gender studies and even literature. In keeping with the collection's title, however, the contributions have in common a concern for the state of the nation, as fact, belief, theory, design and need, in the wake of 'the multiculturalist discourse of the 1980s' and (though rather less obviously) 'the break-up of Cold War politics at the end of the decade' (1). As the editors of the volume and organizers of the conference put it in their Introduction: 'For many, the notion of a post-consensual society produces a state of anxiety. It suggests the erosion of universal values, the rise of special interests, and the destabilization of socio-economic structures. In the sphere of academic institutions, a similar kind of anxiety has been registered.' 'What,' they go on to ask, 'are our options? Is the notion of a coherent national identity an anachronism, at best a utopian figure of unity but worthy of perpetuation, ... an alias for hegemony, [or] an institutionalized repository for political coercion?' (3). Can more recent notions of national identity be squared with contemporary identity politics, or multicultural perspectives with inherited forms of institutional equality?

Not surprisingly, given the range of subject matters dealt with, these questions are addressed more explicitly in some essays than others. Setting out many of the terms of the debate at a theoretical level, Giles Gunn reviews recent interpretations of liberal attempts to accommodate multicultural discourses. He contrasts the former's 'seeming inability ... to rethink the issue of alterity in a multiculturalist world' (11), or to appeal any longer to viable notions of human solidarity or ethics, with the potentials for conceptual transcendence he finds in post-colonial literatures, cultural responses to the holocaust, and African American culture: domains which Gunn believes may give clues as to how to reverse or interrupt 'those symbolic processes that associate the formation of human identity with the denigration of human diversity' (24). In terms at once symbolic and concrete, Thomas Lavelle reviews the politics of the Ebonics debate in Oakland, and finds there familiar processes of interest-group politics and negotiated compromise in which confrontation is superceded by accommodation, and within which liberal and multicultural needs find common ground. How freely that ground has been marked out, however; to what extent the compromise is coerced, and whether the results validate or expose liberal rhetoric depend, he concludes, on which vocabularies are chosen to describe them. Ultimately, there remain 'two competing yet incommensurable interpretations' (119).

In the case of certain kinds of rights talk, whatever consensus obtains at the turn of the twenty-first century appears to exemplify the limits of liberalism marked out by Gunn. For Nina Roth in her treatment of social welfare debate and legislation since the 1960s, and for Ole Moen in his investigation of judicial decisions in the field of Affirmative Action over the same period, the nation has not so much moved beyond, as pursued or experienced a restructuring or reinterpretation of, consensus. In both cases, whatever claims to equity and solidarity American liberalism once invoked and advanced have come up hard against the politics of scarcity and the 'revolt of the haves.' Whether liberalism, as some New Left critics argued, was at its heart illiberal;

whether it was itself a victim of its own achievements, or a handmaiden to neo-conservative activists and Bill Clinton's 'forgotten middle class,' the results have accommodated pernicious or discredited assumptions and (in Moen's words) left 'a third of the nation's citizens behind in that allegedly individual pursuit of happiness' (102).

If one grants Keith Olson's premise, in his contribution on US foreign policy, that relationships exist between the nation's 'common core interests and values' (27) and its ability 'to formulate and project a stable, clear foreign policy' (36), then – depending on one's reading of the 'post-consensus' United States – its diplomacy should in recent years have either become unilaterally survivalist or simply lost coherence. In a context where the nation's best-established international 'other' – the Soviet Union – has quit the game, where public faith in government has fallen off significantly, and where 'globalization' has become both buzz-word and corporate fact, Olson opts for the latter description, though in liberal terms they may be two sides of the same coin. Lamenting the slowness of both Bush and Clinton administrations to adjust to post-Cold War conditions, and the 'steady decline in sense of community' (36), he calls for institutional reform to restore national unity and purpose. As sombre as many of the other contributors, however, Olson concludes that 'no one has yet offered a model of a reformed society to which the vast majority of Americans can bond' (38). Even as some critics lament the absence of such a model, though, Orvar Lofgren insists that however multifarious the nation's culture(s) become(s), its citizens remain in practice united around a broadly-shared set of ways of being, and that the nation is not so much falling apart as revising its ways of hanging together. Whatever cultural fragmentation has taken place, he argues, has also involved – and may even have both fostered and been encouraged by – an increasingly common commitment to commodification, if not the marketplace. Pursuing a logic that lies somewhere between Madison's *Federalist* no. 10 and Stephen Steinberg's *The Ethnic Myth* (1981, 1989), Lofgren suggests that at least some of the claims to 'otherness' in American life proclaim in the process their subscription to a national commercial consensus. The 'politics of multiculturalism,' he goes on, has simply 'developed further the principles' of what he calls the 'standardization of cultural difference' (55).

Focussing as he does on such things as foodways, tourism and the media, Lofgren might be accused of selecting his domains so as to prove his thesis, and of ignoring those aspects of American life which undermine his case. One might, at least, expect many of the literary works engaged in this collection to articulate a very different, and clearly post-consensual, nation. In her paper on the cultural discourses of Whitman, Crèvecoeur and Amy Tan, however, Myra Jehlen at times touches base with Lofgren. She notes how Tan – while exposing the time-bound and culture-specific stances of *Song of Myself* and *Letters From an American Farmer* – does not so much offer a radical alternative to their well-established expressions of national identity as update, qualify and thereby endorse them: identifying, for example, new aspects of 'the traditional American quest for self-sufficiency' (167) by locating it within a communitarian context while subjecting it to a calculus of costs as well as benefits. In Stephen Wolfe's analysis of Joseph Hansen's series of detective fictions about gay private eye Dave Brandstetter, too, the gap between the hegemonic and the marginal is a good deal less than yawning. Wolfe's fictions may interrogate many aspects of traditional

masculine authority, particularly physical violence, Wolfe argues, and they certainly pick apart 'the middle class professional success story' to reveal the political, economic, social, cultural and sexual coercions that often underwrite it (133). At the same time, however, and in part because of the conventions of the genre (narratological and otherwise), they are compromised in their analyses: scrutinizing 'the hysterical excesses of masculinity' but less so its everyday conditions (139); granting individual morality and personal relationships greater weight, in seemingly good liberal fashion, than social or economic structures. Hansen ultimately comes to no more assured a position on the verges of liberalism than does Giles Gunn; at the same time, Wolfe concludes, 'he does not seriously challenge the political retreats of the 1980s and 1990s into the cloistered walls of middle class respectability' (138).

When it comes to the social, political and cultural landscapes of the post-consensus nation that lie beyond those verges, they appear to be characterized, in the collection's remaining essays, by potentials for recognition at the price of fragmentation, and solidarity at the expense of power. In Jeanette Heuving's contribution on feminism and sexuality, the key questions are: what happens to feminism when binary sexual differences no longer constitutes a basic division, and what happens when newer enquiries into sexuality no longer underwrite 'ambitious agendas for social change'? (123). Variations on these concerns are effectively engaged in Lasse Kekki's reading of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (where minority identities and subcultures themselves become a pluralist and conflict-ridden majority); in Katrine Dalsgaard's comparison of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push* (where 'one-eyed' (186) definitions of tradition or consensus can impose a coercive 'otherness' upon literary canons, if not groups (in this case northern, urban, black women), now twice, or even thrice, marginalized); and in Petra Ragnerstam's analysis of documentary films about black gays (where neither identity politics nor documentary aesthetics promise truth, and where – as she quotes Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* – the 'glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than the glorification of the splendid system that makes them so' (202)).

In Ragnerstam's treatment, this leaves the creative documentary-maker and the imaginative critic to think through and create more viable representational forms and contents for the twenty-first century. In the closing paper in this collection, Carla Willard's study of Judy Baca's *Great Wall of L.A.* murals, that means continuing attempts to sketch out and interpret visions of a multicultural community – one which, in Willard's words, 'work[s] to bridge the polarization of community groups' within a 'revisionary narrative design' (205); which, in Giles Gunn's formulation, sustains 'the possibility of cultivating a new ethics based on the care for difference' (18); and which, according to the editors, pursues not 'the liberal goal of a community consensus that gathers its members around a common definition of "the good life,"' but 'a collaborative community engaged with ... creative potential as well as ... inevitable pain ...' (8): appropriate visions with which to wrap up (and in which, quite literally given the dust jacket, to wrap) this attractive, intellectually stimulating and challenging volume.