

Review

Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. The Haymarket Series (eds. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinlter), London and New York: Verso, 1997. 576 pp. ISBN: 1 859 8417 08; cloth and paper; \$16 (paper).

The university, science, technology, and learning were in general manifestations of bourgeois development, under bourgeois control, waging the bourgeois cultural struggle against the feudal order. But now all these forces, in their dominant institutional forms, are opposed to the proletariat; its revolutionary culture while it includes many concrete achievements, is necessarily and mainly potential, a culture of revolutionary criticism and ideological struggle, interpreting, clarifying, projecting, capable of becoming dominant only after the revolution. (Lewis Corey/Fraina, quoted in Denning, 100-1)

In the United States of the 1990s, I think it is fair to say that the influence of the American labor movement generally is somewhat marginal. Every now and then the unions figure in the news, like the successful UPS strike in the summer of 1997, or the AFL-CIO's opposition to the NAFTA treaty some years ago. Generally speaking, however, the relative power and impact of the labor movement in the US today, be it economically or politically, not to mention culturally, is weak. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mike Eisner of Disney productions and their like are more admired as central figures in American public life than John Sweeney (he is the current leader of the AFL-CIO, in case you didn't know). Numbers tell part of the story: under ten per cent of the private sector labor force is unionized, and perhaps more importantly, since the 1980s, unions have been winning less than half of the elections held by the National Labor Relations Board in order to gain recognition as bargaining units for workers at specific plants. Over twenty states have 'right-to-work' laws, the Orwellian doublespeak term that outlaws union shops. American wage levels are low compared to those of Western Europe, as are the various forms of welfare provision of the kind we know here.

It was not always so. From the beginning of the 1930s until the end of the 1940s, the American labor movement was a force to be reckoned with, economically, politically, and culturally. In the course of the Great Depression, during the Second World War, and in its aftermath, labor activists as well as many others on the American left were active players on the US scene, contributing to the shaping of Roosevelt's New Deal. The labor movement was not only important in the economic and political landscape, but was also an organizational center that attracted to its cultural orbit a remarkable range of writers, intellectuals, and artists. This book is about these people and the way they related to their time, how they shaped and were shaped by it. It is a book that has several uses. Denning's objective is to point out to the readers that many of the cultural manifestations we take to be quintessentially American today originated with the American left during the twenties,

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the thirties and the forties. He also argues that many elements of the culture created by the American left during these years are with us today, but that we don't realize their origins. It came as an interesting revelation to me that two cartoon characters dear to my heart, Mr. Magoo and Gerald McBoingBoing, were the creations of artists like John Hubley of UPA, who had been leading figures in the union fights and strikes at Walt Disney in the early forties, and who created a new modernist drawing style that went counter to the more traditionalist one favored by Disney at the time. He replaced mice, pigs and bunnies with humans, focusing on social content rather than on the more formalist style perfected by Disney.

Who's Who?

For the reader who is interested in knowing who was active in what field, there are the names of writers and artists, musicians and theater people, literally hundreds of them. For the reader who wants to know about who these people worked with, and how they saw their own work, Denning provides a good starting point. In that way, the book works as a kind of 'Who's Who?' of American culture from the 1930s to the 1950s. In this way *The Cultural Front* serves to rescue the people, institutions, and activities of the Popular Front as a social movement from the oblivion it has been sliding into since the mortal wounds it suffered during the heyday of anti-communism and the Cold War, and to point out that the Popular Front was just that: a broad coalition of disparate people and organizations dedicated to a vision of life in the US quite different from the market-dominated society and culture we know today. Furthermore, the book tries to point out that this vision might well be worthwhile as an organizing orientation today. (It is interesting to note that Denning, who is a professor of American Studies at Yale University, has been quite active in organizing graduate teaching assistants and other low-class workers in their quest for better working conditions. See the following sites on the Internet for more information: <http://www.yale.edu/geso/denning.htm>.)

What were the Cultural Sectors?

There are major sections on literature and literary criticism, music from jazz and the blues to opera, and two interesting chapters on film, where the author zeroes in on Orson Welles and Walt Disney. These two sections alone make the book worthwhile, and lead to an important point that the author is making all along the way: reactions to changing work situations cause people in them to change. The artist who works as a drawer of cartoons in a Disney studio has a different view of the world than the one who is the benefactor of the largesse of an aesthetically inclined wealthy person. One is a wage earner, the other is the client of a patron, and their perception of reality and their life trajectories are different. Denning argues that the industrial age, with its changed relations between producer and consumer, between owner and worker, profoundly changed the nature of artistic work from that of the craftsman to that of the industrial worker. There is nothing new in this assertion, but the documentation of how this transformation took place in the US is a valuable contribution to American Studies.

A Revisionist Orientation

Much has been written about the Popular Front, and for many years, the prevailing argument has been that it was just that: a 'front' behind which the Communist Party of the USA could carry out its work of trying to support the USSR's political goals. Denning contends that the generally accepted view of the Popular Front as a tool of the CPUSA is incorrect. His view is that the CPUSA was an important part of the Popular Front, but the front as a whole constituted what Gramsci has called a 'historical bloc,' a broad coalition of 'fractions and subaltern classes.' In other words, he takes the idea of a 'front' the way the coiners of the expression intended it, rather than accepting the word's Cold War meaning: a tool of the Global Communist Conspiracy. He writes: 'It is mistaken to see the Popular Front as a marriage of communists with liberals. The heart of the Popular Front as a social movement lay among those who were noncommunist socialists and independent leftists, working with communists and liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a party nor a liberal New Deal culture' (5). Further on, after having discussed the fractious nature of the political scene of the day, with its fights between Stalinists, Trotskyists and the other groups that constituted the political surfaces of the front, Denning notes the tone of the book: '... mine is less a story of political division than of cultural continuities; the culture of the Popular Front represented a larger laboring of American culture, which political adversaries often shared in shaping' (26). This bloc had the potential to become hegemonic in a period of social upheaval. He argues that there was a possibility that this could have happened in the US of the thirties and forties, that a laborist, social democratic bloc could have emerged as a hegemon. 'Gramsci's concept of hegemony begins not with the question of individual 'commitment' but with the question of how social movements are organized among both the dominant and subordinate groups, how social groups are led. The building of hegemony is not only a matter of 'ideas,' of winning hearts and minds, but also of participation, as people are mobilized in cultural institutions' (63).

State, Market and Civil Society

At an abstract level, it might be said that Denning's story of the cultural battles of the New Deal Era demonstrates how the forces of the market maintained their role as the dominant shapers of American culture, and that market forces defeated attempts by the working classes' civil society to shape its culture and to expand its influence in a non-commodified or de-commodified form. In this approach, the Cultural Front is seen as more than a collective of people with individual political commitment. Denning's theoretical framework is based on the Gramscian idea of the historical bloc: 'In analyzing a historical bloc, Gramsci turns to the dialectic of base and superstructure, seeing social movements and alliances as microcosms of the social order as a whole.'

The third actor in this matrix, the state, also played an important part. Initially, during the early years of the New Deal, the state, through WPA programs like the Federal Writers' Project, supported some of the American left's versions of what life in America was and, to a certain extent, what it should become. Denning notes that the products of these projects were perhaps less important than the way in which they were organized. In addition, through its legislation, the state, with the National Labor Relations Act of 1935,

recognized the unions' right to represent workers in a bargaining situation. This recognition was the foundation for the labor movement's power base in the next twenty years.

At the time of the Great Depression and its aftermath, partial accommodation to worker demands was a reasonable strategy for the historical bloc that is linked to the market. The market bloc had been weakened by the economic crisis, and could not afford an open confrontation with a contending bloc across the board in a country where, to quote Denning quoting a poll from *Fortune* from the early forties, twenty five per cent of the population thought socialism was a good idea, and another thirty five per cent were not against it. But with the end of World War II, which solved the country's economic crisis, and with the onset of the Cold War and the confrontation with the Soviet Union, the market bloc was able to abandon this strategy. The American national interest as defined by the state in the Cold War context became far more market oriented than it had been, and the communalist, non-commodified approach to satisfying human needs and problems was attacked as communist, and then marginalized, fragmented and to a large extent, expunged from the national consciousness and institutional structure. Cultural workers as a group did not disappear, but they were reorganized in other, market-oriented institutions. The potential that lay in the ideas and visions of the Cultural Front remained only potential (a post-modernist jokester might say they are impotential today). Cultural institutions in the US of today are part of the market.

Who Were They?

The Cultural Front, Denning argues, grew out of, and worked in, three major areas which characterized the Popular Front: the development of the CIO as an organization of industrial unionism, internationalist anti-fascism, and the struggle for civil liberties and against labor repression. Denning sees the CIO as the central organizing force around which the historical bloc coalesced. He characterizes it as basically driven by a Social Democratic vision that was somehow to be adapted to and grow out of the American environment.

According to Denning, three distinct groups came together in the Cultural Front: the Moderns, the Plebeians and the Émigrés. Denning notes their origins and discusses at length the way in which they worked relative to the issues of their time, as well as the way in which they saw themselves changed by their reaction to the Depression, the growing menace of fascism abroad, the question of civil rights, and the issue of labor repression at home. The Moderns were the established writers and artists, primarily of an Anglo background: people who had been inspired by the European modernist movements in art and literature. Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald are some of the more prominent names. The Émigrés, primarily refugees from fascism, names like Brecht and Eisler, Seghers and Adorno, but including C.L.R. James of Trinidad, also contributed to the Cultural Front. The Plebeians came out of the immigrant communities as well as the Black South; they were the 'new Americans,' primarily second-generation immigrants, products of the American system of public education. Theirs is the longest list, and Denning sees them as the most important, since they came from the same background as the vast majority of people who were part of the industrial working class. Their

different cultural heritages, reworked and in the process of adapting to the industrial environment, became a recognized part of the American cultural landscape of the time. Here, people like Philip Rahv, a self-taught man who came to the US at the age of fourteen, had little formal schooling, and ended as a professor at Brandeis, is noted, as is Sidney Hook, who tried to develop an American Marxism in which he attempted to replace the Hegelian elements of Marxism with John Dewey's pragmatism. For Denning, however, the most important figure is an Italian immigrant, Lewis Corey/Louis Fraina, a contemporary of Gramsci, and the author of two books, *The Decline of American Capitalism* and *The Crisis of the Middle Class*. In these, Corey/Fraina develops ideas about the position of the 'cultural worker' in the age of mass communications.

The Main Phases of the Age of the CIO and the Popular Front

Denning lays out the time he writes about in segments conveniently marked by certain milestones or surges in activity on the left: the initial upsurge of 1933-34 which culminated in the textile strikes and the subsequent passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act. Then 1936-37, with the great strikes in Akron and Flint, the 'sit-downs' taking place at the same time as the antifascist mobilizations occasioned by the Spanish Civil War. He also mentions the conservative counteroffensive symbolized by the Memorial Day massacre in Chicago and the Dies committee's initial hearings. The third wave was the upsurge in union organization in 1940-41 and the beginnings of the Progressive movement with Henry Wallace as its figurehead, culminating in 1946-48, when the dream of some kind of Social Democratic future for the United States foundered on the reefs of Taft-Hartley, the failure of Operation Dixie – the attempt to unionize the South – and the onset of the Cold War.

These milestones indicate that Denning sees the industrial union movement, concentrated in and around the CIO, as the central axis of an effort to concretize a 'vision of social reconstruction.' The Cultural Front's contribution to the time was to give the participants, who were linked by their class to the historical bloc, a voice of their own. The way forward was through the creation of institutions, cultural apparatus, and audiences that grew out of the milieu itself. But it was not to be. The ruins of the Cultural Front that still exist today have been coopted and integrated into a market-based cultural complex, with those parts that attempted to create a communitarian framework almost completely buried, or surviving in little noticed pockets around the country. It remains to be seen how long this state of affairs will continue.