



**CULTURE AND CRISIS IN BRITAIN
IN THE THIRTIES**

**Edited by Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann,
David Margolies and Carole Snee**

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This volume of essays, edited by four of the twelve contributors, has a general introduction by the late James Klugmann; six articles on poetry, literary periodicals and novels; one on the Left Book Club, and four on the cinema and the theatre. Rather oddly, there is no attempt by the editors to define what they mean by culture. They note they have omitted reference to popular culture, by which they mean sport, radio, press and recreation, and they have also deliberately left out the visual arts, music and architecture. Even so, and without encouraging a tedious Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies approach, it is unhelpful that all definitions are eschewed, and that in particular it is never made explicit whose culture is being discussed. It is, however, clear in the context of the majority of the articles published, that it is the middle class who are being considered, and most of the volume is an analysis of the intellectual and cultural fare that was on offer to those who were moving away from the values of bourgeois society. The stated aim of this book is to correct the idea that the radical culture of the decade was 'simplistic, unimaginative and crudely propagandist' (p9); and the editors end their Foreword with the hope 'that, despite the omissions, there is enough here to help correct some of the commoner misunderstandings and distortions — most notably, that the thirties culture was just a small group of poets talking to one another, or that the whole radical and revolutionary impetus faded out in 1939, leaving not a rack behind' (p 11).

The facts of crisis can not be disputed: after 1930 it was widely believed that bourgeois society was breaking up; there was

a growing recognition, especially among the scientists, of the large scale social waste of world capitalism; there was an increasing appreciation of the planned, rational alternative which almost everyone on the Left believed was being constructed in the Soviet Union; there was the remarkable surge of anti-war feeling and sentiment (more powerful in 1930 than in 1920) that was to resound throughout the decade; and all this against the sombre background to the growing power of international fascism, aided and abetted by the propertied classes everywhere. These were the components of the profound crisis which deeply and passionately affected cultural workers everywhere, as well as those who raced whippets, took part in Leek competitions, and generally worked with their hands, when there was work to be had.

We can all appreciate the editorial problems of compressing this enormous subject into a volume of under 300 pages; but what is wrong with this book is not brevity of treatment but the failure to identify certain crucial problems. The first half of this book is written not just by bookish people — as it should be — but by bookish people of a particular kind: those who seem to assume that culture for the most part equals literature, and furthermore, the sort of literature that will get discussed in departments of Eng Lit. It is from this mistaken and lopsided belief that derives the view that Auden, Spender and Day Lewis dominated the decade; that these were the poets whom young intellectuals read, admired and reacted to; that more than any group of cultural workers, the poets encapsulated the spirit of the decade. Kettle says this at the end of his article: 'The impact of Auden's poetry on young intellectuals was so great . . . because with great intellectual and verbal energy his poetry probed and explored many areas of consciousness — scientific, psychological, political, aesthetic — and came up with striking and stimulating connections embodied in phrases and images of vivid contemporary resonance' (p100); and this is what that great Eng Lit entrepreneur, Samuel Hynes, is also saying in the 400 pages of *The Auden Generation*.

What kind of evidence is there for Kettle's statement about Auden and 'young intellectuals'? Does it apply, for instance, to the natural scientists, so many of whom were radicalised during this decade; or to the social scientists of the London School of Economics; or to the worker-intellectuals who identify themselves as readers of the publications of Lawrence and Wishart, or of the Left Book Club; or to the important groups among the Jewish middle class who

were moving sharply towards the left in these years? When we are talking about Culture and Crisis, we are talking about the emergence of a counter-culture which denied, or attempted to deny, bourgeois values; which tried to construct a system of beliefs, emotional and intellectual, which provided an alternative to existing ideas, and which provided as well a militant programme for actually doing something. It was inevitably a difficult business for middle-class intellectuals who had been through the traditional socialising systems of grammar or public schools, and university; and what emerged was often crude, rough, sectarian, but also infused with enormous vitality, energy and confidence. So how do we measure the impact of Auden *et al* — high culture — against the emotional and political influence of Russian and French films, or mass political rallies, or commitment to the hunger marches, or the singing of Paul Robeson at meetings for Spain, or the bitter cartoons of Holland, Fitton and Boswell in *Left Review*?; and if we are looking for solid, long term, consciousness-raising matter, let us begin where this volume ought to have begun, with the implantation of Marxism in middle class intellectual concerns. I grant that it is necessary and important to analyse Auden and his fellows, just as I grant the general importance of literary criticism in the understanding of any society at any time in the modern period; but I deny emphatically that Auden and his group were central to the emerging radical culture of the thirties: it is a myth endlessly propagated by departments of English literature the world over, and regrettably accepted by the editors and most contributors to this volume.

This is a British — indeed largely English — volume, and it thereby misses a major dimension of the radical culture of these years, namely its international involvement. It also wholly omits a related component, anti-imperialism — an important consideration especially for the student generations. No one who lived through those years could ignore world politics, and those who were radicalised became passionately involved with the cultures and the anti-fascist struggles of countries in all the continents. The contents list of *Left Review*, or even more, *New Writing* (which incidentally gets no mention at all in this volume dominated by literary experts) will make the general point that the radical 'them' against 'us' syndrome was internationalist in its vision and understanding.

This volume, then, is very thin gruel; and if this was all the young intellectuals of the thirties had to feed on it is surprising that more of them did not fall away into the cosy,

well-padded embraces of the capitalist order (and large numbers did just that, of course). And since the editors have missed many things that mattered, I propose to allow myself the indulgence, since I went through this period myself, of setting down, briefly, my own intellectual history, since it will at least illustrate some of the materials the present editors have ignored. I was at LSE, where I went in the autumn of 1934 and soon after joined the CP. I would guess the experience of being a communist at LSE was different in a number of ways from that of Oxbridge. For one thing, it fortunately had far fewer public school boys; and for another, it was a mixed institution, and its sex culture was heterosexual. Auden I read and enjoyed, but only his poem 'Spain' really moved me. Spender as a poet had little appeal at any time; his *Forward from Liberalism* was widely agreed to be feeble stuff; and we all knew his antics in Spain during the early part of the war. Day Lewis I thought unexciting. I did in fact read a lot of poetry, but of the modern poets the only one I knew by heart was the early Eliot. For me Wilfred Owen was as important as Auden, and Baudelaire was more important than either. Not one of the novelists discussed by Widdowson (Woolf, Huxley, Upward, Warner, Orwell, Greene, Isherwood) was of great interest to me, although I had read something from most of them, especially Huxley, Orwell and Isherwood. Much more significant were the anti-war writers: Aldington, Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Remarque, Graves, Frederic Manning, Sassoon, Somerset Maugham (*For Services Rendered*), R C Sheriff. All my generation seemed to read the translations of Silone, especially *Fontamara*; and I would add Malraux's *La Condition Humaine*, Ralph Bates *The Olive Field* and *Lean Men*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and a whole draft of American writers: Mike Gold, James T Farrell, Hemingway, Dos Passos, John Steinbeck; and the Russian *And Quiet Flows the Don* (which we thought was by Sholokhov, and maybe it was). But the lasting intellectual influence, without in any way depreciating my literary reading, was Marxism; and my generation at LSE read the *Select Correspondence* (for me personally quite the most important text of my early years); all the historical writings of Marx that were available; the histories of Allen Hutt, the writings of Bernal which culminated in *The Social Function of Science*; anything Maurice Dobb wrote; everything that came out of Spain; Edgar Snow's enormously influential *Red Star over China*; Palme Dutt's Notes of the Month and his *World Politics*; Lenin, especially *State and Revolution* and *Imperialism*; and Brailsford, especially on

India. The most important personal influence on me was Harold Laski: I was entranced by his lectures, I read everything he wrote, and above all, despite political differences, he was the model of the committed intellectual. Laski pushed me into libraries while the political situation was pulling me out on the streets. And because of Laski I developed two particular interests: one was the French humanists of the 18th century, for whom Plechanov, as well as Laski, was my guide; and the American scene, so that every week I read the *Nation*, and when I could get it, *New Masses*.

Young intellectuals in opposition to the society in which they live take their iconoclasm from many different sources: minor as well as major; and the list given above of some of the influences that went to the making of a radical is by no means complete (it misses the Marx Brothers, for instance), and for different individuals the emphasis will obviously be different. But at the centre was the Marxism of the thirties, whatever its deficiencies. And when the important and necessary qualification 'whatever its deficiencies' is added, let it not be forgotten that by comparison with much of the teaching and the scholarship of the period, the thirties Marxism was tremendously exciting and intellectually invigorating.

I have one more complaint about this volume before I conclude; although I must except from all my strictures the essay on Leavis and *Scrutiny* by Iain Wright, which seems to me a model of clear exposition and structure; and, at a different level, the essays on film and theatre, which have the merit of saying something new, and which also have a feeling for the moods of the decade. But my comment concerns the literary articles on their own assumptions; and for what it is worth, not being an Eng Lit man myself, they strike me as really not very lively. Their analysis is too bitty, or too minor in import, or just not very good, as with David Margolies on *Left Review*. Surely anyone discussing Caudwell these days must come to terms with the assessments of Francis Mulhern and Edward Thompson; and how can Margolies justify not even mentioning them in his references? He may think them wrong headed, or even absurd; but so? We are, are we not, in favour of good solid argument within the Left? as well as against those on the other side?

I am sorry I have found this volume broken backed; and I am afraid I think the whole matter will have to be done again. But I wait, with my head bowed, for the heavens to fall upon me.

John Saville