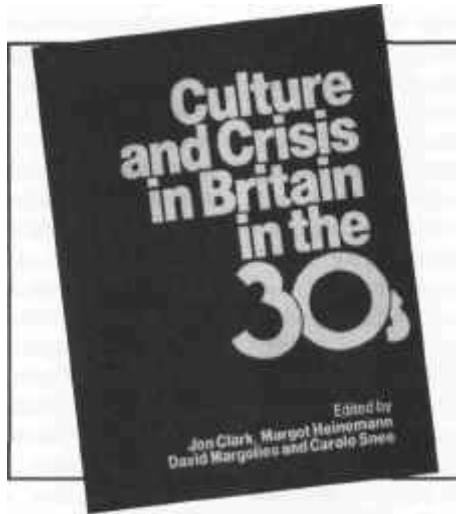


Culture and Crisis in the Thirties

Jack Cohen



I write to voice my strong protest at John Saville's extraordinary, dismissive and almost wholly negative review of *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*.

He begins by asserting that the contributors, for the most part, assume that 'culture equals Eng Lit', that from this lopsided view the idea has developed that Auden, Spender and his group had the greatest influence over young intellectuals, 'dominated', and 'encapsulated the spirit of the decade'. He quotes Arnold Kettle's piece in which there occur the following words — 'the impact of Auden's poetry was so great . . . ' — to prove this. Having erected these Aunt Sallys he demands to know what evidence there is for them and denies vehemently that 'Auden and his group were central to the radically emerging culture of the thirties'.

Saville does not and cannot substantiate any of these charges. Along with later statements they give the impression that he has not really read some of the contributions seriously. He himself notes that for reasons of space the editors state that they have been unable to treat other important areas of cultural production. Even so, the volume discusses film (two articles), theatre (two articles) and the Left Book Club. Literature certainly occupies a commanding position. This is because the impact of the crisis of the thirties on sections of the middle class and their radicalisation — a totally new phenomenon in Britain — was expressed culturally most vividly and extensively in poetry, literary criticism and fiction.

Arnold Kettle certainly says (in an illuminating piece on Auden's contradictory political and poetical development) that

Auden had a great influence on young intellectuals. It would be silly to deny it. So did Eliot. For both in their opposed ways reflected some of the features of the decade which were being deeply felt by young intellectuals. But to say that young intellectuals read and admired Auden is not the same thing as asserting that those who contribute the articles on literature either say or believe that Auden and his group 'dominated' or 'encapsulated' or were 'central' to the decade.

The editors and contributors emphasise throughout that what was really 'central' to the decade and 'dominated' it was economic crisis, the menace of fascism and war, the inspiration of a socialist alternative by the Soviet Union, the effort to mobilise the widest forces of the people in a common front against fascism and war, especially by the Communist Party and its members.

The contributors to this volume seek to explore how all these factors were reflected in the outlook, work and political commitment of intellectuals in all their variety, contradiction and development as well as in new cultural advances in the labour movement. This is the whole point of the book.

Incidentally, he does not seem to have noticed that three poets who can be said really to have 'encapsulated' the spirit of the decade are discussed in depth and with great insight by Margot Heinemann in 'Louis McNiece, John Cornford and Clive Branson; Three Left-wing Poets', a contribution which Saville does not even mention.

The Introduction

Later on he writes that this volume ought to

have begun 'with the implantation of Marxism in middle-class intellectual concerns'. This is exactly where the volume does, in fact, begin, with James Klugmann's splendid comprehensive and witty account of the impact of the economic, political and cultural crises of the thirties on students and intellectuals, their radicalisation and turn towards Marxism and the Communist Party. It is astonishing that Saville, who criticises some of the contributors for failing to refer to writers he regards as important, should totally omit any mention whatsoever of this key, introductory article. There would seem to be more in this than simple negligence.

So he dismisses the whole volume as 'very thin gruel' which he feels called upon to thicken with two columns describing his own cultural and intellectual history 'since it will at least illustrate some of the materials the present editors have ignored' (p.30).

This account and the cultural development he described, though interesting, is not very relevant. James Klugmann outlines similar developments as being fairly general amongst the students of the time.

What it does contain is a disgraceful statement in a section dealing with some alleged 'differences' between Oxbridge and LSE: 'It (LSE) was a mixed institution and its sex culture was heterosexual.' What relevance has this to the problems being discussed? Many groups of the National Front could make a similar boast. Is it a piece of sexual one-upmanship by an LSE man of the 30s over Oxbridge? This implied smear of Oxbridge communists could surely be left to media commentators on the Blunt affair. In any case, I would have thought that these days, people would regard the most important feature of a sex culture as being not whether it is homo- or heterosexual but whether it is *sexist*, and sexism was as rife at LSE as it was everywhere else at the time, in spite of it being a 'mixed institution'.

Saville concludes by describing the volume as 'broken-backed' and needing to be done 'all over again'. This I can only regard as being most presumptuous in view of the calibre of the writers and the quality of the contributions. Of course it can be criticised but, taken as a whole, it is a most stimulating and useful contribution to our understanding of the thirties.

Finally, it is sad to have to report that the only thoroughly hostile review of a book by Marxist writers seeking to make a Marxist analysis of the culture and crisis of the thirties, appears in *Marxism Today*. The *Morning Star*, *Comment*, *New Society*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Time Out*, *Tribune* and *New Statesman*, although they had their criticisms, all gave it positive reviews.