

American Culture - a cop out

Lynn Garafola



David Edgar's review of American culture at the beginning of the eighties ('American Culture, A Cop Out', October 1980) is both simplistic and misleading. Basing his analysis on the rather limited evidence of Broadway musicals and commercially successful films, he concludes that American culture today lacks a sense of history and politics.

Contrary to Mr. Edgar's assertion that

'whatever radicalism the literary and artistic culture of New York may have had in the 1960s, has now more or less drained away', radicalism remains a force in American artistic and intellectual life. But to discover this, one must venture outside the commercial mainstream of Hollywood, Broadway, and New York's Publishers Row. In scores of 'alternative' organisations scattered from coast to coast, in the regional theatre movement and independent cinema, the cultural and political aspirations of the New Left continue to be felt.

Within the New York area, the Public Theatre and Negro Ensemble Company exemplify theatrical institutions that have not lost touch with the social concerns of the day. Since the late sixties, the Negro Ensemble Company has produced a steady stream of serious plays, often with political content. The Public Theatre actively encourages both 'minority' and feminist work through stagings of Third World and women playwrights — such as Ntozake Shange of *For Colored Girls Only* fame — and programmes aimed at training minority professionals and building minority audiences. Such efforts are not limited to New York. Civic theatres throughout the country, where production of new plays now largely occurs, must actively solicit both minority representation and 'non-traditional' audiences to qualify for government funding.

The New Left legacy is evident as well in the independent cinema which thanks again to public funding by state arts and humanities councils and the National

Endowment for the Humanities — today the largest source of financing outside the private sector — has become a significant force on America's cinematic horizon. In 1979, for the first time, independents were represented at the prestigious New York Film Festival in more than token numbers. Their lobbying efforts resulted in last winter's 'Independent Focus' on public television, and this spring no less than four independent efforts — including *The War At Home*, a film about the anti-war movement in Wisconsin, and *The Trials of Alger Hiss* — enjoyed commercial runs in New York.

Radicalised by the sixties

By contrast with Hollywood's star directors of the seventies — Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and Brian De Palma — filmmakers like Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, U.S.A.*), Lorraine Grey (*With Babies and Banners*), Deborah Schaffer and Stuart Bird (*The Wobblies*) were not merely touched by the sixties but radicalised by them. Their work reflects the political radicalism and feminist legacy of the New Left coupled with a 'populist' concern for accessibility. Recent years have seen an enormous spate of 'docudramas' inspired by the 'new labour history', documentaries about the anti-nuclear movement, and films about grassroots issues ranging from tenants' rights to police brutality. To this must be added the thriving 'minority' cinema, particularly among Latins. At last year's Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, no less than thirty films by Chicanos — Mexican

Americans — were entered in competition.

Within the universities, moreover, radical studies have flourished in the seventies — a trend noted with alarm by the *Wall Street Journal*. Radical caucuses with a sizeable following among junior faculty and graduate students have sprung up in nearly every academic discipline, and many universities now offer courses in Marxist studies. At the same time, the decade has witnessed a proliferation of avowedly Marxist publications. Some, like the *Review of Radical Political Economy* and the *Radical History Review*, are directed mainly to

specialists. Others, like *Marxist Perspectives* and *Social Text*, address a broad range of both cultural and political issues.

Mr Edgar's contention that in American culture today, there is a 'draining incapacity to see social events socially' reveals in the guise of artistic commentary an underlying political bias. In neither the American theatre nor the American cinema is to be found a radical politics of a classic European Marxist type. Rather one must look to cross-class movements — feminism, gay rights, the anti-nuclear movement, the struggle for racial justice — for a radical critique of American

society. Whether or not one approves of these movements, they cannot be dismissed. Indeed, their repercussions are being increasingly felt in Europe itself where they pose a challenge to traditional left-wing politics.

American culture as it enters the eighties offers a maze of conflicting trends. Mr Edgar's indictment of Broadway may well be accurate. But to judge American culture by the musicals on New York's 'great white way' is as erroneous a method of analysis as judging British culture entirely by the West End.

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