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Book Reviews

Where Left meets Right in Critical Responses to Mass Culture

PAUL R. GORMAN. *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth Century America.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

SCHOLARS of intellectual history and popular culture will appreciate Paul Gorman's contribution to the field in, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth Century America,* albeit less encompassing than the title suggests. In this monograph, Gorman explores the historical bias against popular culture in the American intellectual tradition from the turn of the century to 1960. Specifically, he addresses the contradictory beliefs held by American intellectuals on the left who at once championed the common man and denounced mass culture as debased. He proposes that American intellectuals essentially set themselves up as a "democratic clerisy" who justified their own superiority and expert opinion as essential to upholding democracy (p. 10). They believed that the public was predominantly passive and suasible, thus, in need of intellectual guidance in their cultural choices and protection from manipulation by the consumer driven mass media. While the intellectuals may have had noble motives, Gorman contends that they were flawed by their inability to see the public as active agents and preoccupied with maintaining their own place in a society experiencing phenomenal growth in mass entertainment. In the end, their presumptions led them to the same cultural critique that many right-wing paternalist intellectuals had espoused in the late nineteenth century.

Gorman's thesis adds complexity to historical interpretations of American intellectuals and expands scholarship on popular culture, particularly for the first two-thirds of the twentieth- century. In many respects his work picks up where Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* left off as Gorman reviews the late nineteenth-century establishment of hierarchy in the arts, reiterating the

Victorian disdain for popular culture at the outset but centering more on the left-leaning intellectuals of the early twentieth century.[1] Although he revisits scenes that previous historians have depicted (Richard Pells', Neil Jumonville's, and Terry Cooney's studies of the New York intellectuals come to mind), Gorman uses a wider brush to paint his study of American intellectuals in the modernist period.[2]

Rather than exploring a particular school of theorists, he uses a longue durée approach to illustrate the sweeping contours of American intellectual thought from the Progressive Era to the late 1950s. Such a construction provides the reader with a larger picture of multiple intellectual groups spanning most of the twentieth-century as well as more detailed portraits of influential individuals in certain periods. This method is particularly fruitful in allowing Gorman to compare and contrast intellectual traditions along the way, building up to his conclusions about the consistency of intellectual opposition to mass culture.

The reader should be aware that the arts considered in this work are primarily literary arts. If one is looking for insight into intellectual criticism of the visual arts or performing arts, it will only be found in brief snippets here.[3] Gorman centers his analysis on the published material in which intellectuals generally debate, including literary magazines, journals, monographs, textbooks, and newspapers. As his subjects rarely concerned themselves with other popular forms, neither does Gorman. This is unfortunate, since short sections on jazz (p. 133-135) and painting (p. 151-156) add depth to his assessments of the intelligencia's conflicting criticism and enjoyment of popular and high art forms.

The work opens with a chapter on the conservative Victorian outlook against popular entertainments and ends with a detailed look at Dwight Macdonald's writing, skillfully bringing the intellectual argument full circle to where far left meets right-leaning interpretations of mass culture. Roughly, the first half of the book traces the intellectual development of the mass culture critique and exposes its inherent ironies. First, Gorman looks at the "old order," finding that right-wing elite rejected popular arts as lowbrow entertainment that threatened the social order and failed to elevate its audiences. Since no improvement was thought to be forthcoming, the gentile critics advocated a hierarchy for the arts to maintain social distinction and preserve high culture. Levine's influence is most noticeable here. Yet Gorman quickly moves to expand into his own historical framework.

The second chapter presents another dimension to the intellectual tradition added in the Progressive Era. Gorman explains how reformers considered popular culture more a product of hard working conditions and poor living quarters

particular to the modern urban-industrial environment than a result of common people's moral depravity. Unlike their predecessors, Progressive reformers believed the masses could be uplifted by gaining knowledge of and exposure to more sophisticated cultural pursuits. Gorman credits the Progressives with finding a "new appreciation of environmental and social sources behind the popularity of entertainments," such as dance halls and sensational journalism, but faults them for settling on a "victim ideology" that objectified the common people and "underestimated the public's ability to choose its own most useful cultural communications" (p. 47). This assessment carries throughout the remainder of the book, as Gorman finds it reinforced by each generation of American intellectuals.

The third chapter elaborates on the irony of leftist intellectual beliefs as Gorman looks more closely at the radicals of the 1920s. This group of intellectuals offered the most promise of accepting popular culture because they had the greatest ambitions for overcoming Victorian sensibilities and changing what they perceived to be America's strict and limited aesthetic hierarchy. The radicals welcomed modernism and its efforts to join arts and everyday life experiences as much as they supported working class political movements. However, Gorman sees the potential for embracing popular culture squandered by intellectuals behind avant-garde journals like *Seven Art, Little Review, Soil, Dial,* and The *Seven Lively Arts* who dismissed the "facile tastes" of the masses (p. 61). Even cultural pluralists and defenders of democracy like Randolph Bourne not only rejected what they considered lowbrow popular culture but insisted that intellectuals would have "to resist the stale culture of the masses as we resist the stale culture of the aristocrats. It is easy to be lenient and pseudo-human, and call it democracy" nevertheless, critics should protect high culture for the benefit of all (p. 63). In the end, radical intellectuals shared with the old guard a paternalistic view of the common man and also neglected to take into consideration their cultural interests and role in shaping popular culture. The radical intellectuals succeeded in redefining aesthetic standards and took pleasure in shocking conservative Victorians with modernist forms, yet once again proved more interested in securing their own place in the social order than in reevaluating popular entertainment. By this point, Gorman has established the continuities in both right and left intellectuals' defense of the highbrow/lowbrow order.

The second half of this monograph deals more closely with the expansion of mass entertainments and intellectuals' responses in the interwar and, especially, post-World War II period. The fourth chapter centers on the social scientists'

view of popular culture. Chapters five and six focus on the communist thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s and the New York Intellectuals of the 1930s to 1950s. These two groups overlap considerably and Gorman reveals shared characteristics between them and the intellectual traditions previously surveyed. Like the Progressives, the Communists found the public victimized by larger forces beyond their control. In their view, capitalism was the countervailing factor encouraging popular indulgence in unsatisfactory consumer-oriented art and entertainment. On the other hand, sociologists and cultural critics of the New York intellectual group blamed modern urban life, with new conditions of affluence and proliferations of mass produced cultural items, for the abjectivity of public tastes. Many of these intellectuals added a new dimension to their critique by asserting that the common man was no longer only a victim of circumstances but also a hinderance to progress. They became some of the strongest proponents of protecting high culture from the corruption of popular forms.

Gorman's most engaging chapter is the final section on Dwight Macdonald, who serves as a microcosm of the intellectuals' developments throughout the bulk of this text and represents the death of hope that left intellectuals could reconcile their beliefs in democracy with their antagonism to popular culture. Gorman follows Macdonald's career from his work at the conservative *Fortune* magazine where he ironically established his more radical political viewpoints, to his editorial years for *Partisan Review* and *Politics* where he honed his particular brand of political and cultural thinking. Macdonald mirrors intellectual developments in earlier chapters since he begins his professional life at a conservative publication, but he himself goes through a transformation from being a radical communist to a stringent post-war adversary of totalitarianism and communism—all the while extolling the benefits of high culture and bemoaning popular culture as increasingly ignominious. He also neglects to consider popular opinions or the common audiences' role in shaping their preferred forms of popular culture. In this chapter Gorman swings the reader through a review of the major themes of the text and adds insight into radical thinking, aesthetic debates with art critic Clement Greenberg, and the influence of the Frankfurt School on Macdonald. The chapter serves as a unique summary and conclusion to this far-ranging work.

On the whole, the monograph suffers from two fundamental omissions. Clearly, Gorman considers it unfortunate that critics labeled common men "underdeveloped" and denied their role in choosing their own arts and entertainments; nevertheless he, too, overlooks the role of the audiences of mass culture that he considers so important. While trying to stress agency as an essential

component to accurate analyses of popular culture, Gorman neglects to incorporate popular views into his study. He gives some hope to the reader that his work will address this important counterpart to the story when he assesses Rheta Dorr's portrayal of an immigrant girl who falls victim to commercialized pleasures in a progressive reformer's expose. Gorman asks the reader to "consider how different Annie Donnelly story might have been, for instance, if it were taken from the girl's own perspective" (p. 48). Indeed. Of course, readers may look elsewhere for accounts of popular culture from the people's point of view.[4] Still, Gorman's argument might have benefitted from incorporation of cultural historians methods.

This work is also disappointing in its failure to assess developments in popular culture and intellectual responses to it beyond 1960. Omitting an era of vast social change which sparked greater appreciation of individual choices and actions, moreover one in which there was an explosion in pop arts, leaves the task of assessing new left and neoconservative re-evaluations of popular culture to other scholars.

These criticisms should not, however, detract from what Gorman has accomplished in this work. His study poses a fine synthesis of intellectual thought which gathers a patchwork of insightful vignettes on prominent characters and schools of thought into a well crafted quilt revealing the common ties that bind together critical views of popular culture. The contours of his argument linking left intellectuals and their critiques of mass entertainment to right leaning defenders of high culture is convincing. Moreover, Gorman provocatively asserts that intellectuals' concerns with status left them entirely out of touch with popular culture's real actors and audiences. This book should elicit greater debate on the nature and goals of both past and present cultural critiques.

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Notes

1. Laurence Levine, *HighBrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
2. Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals During the 1940s and 1950s*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985); Neil Jumonville *Critical Crossings: New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: "Partisan Review" and Its Circle*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1986).
3. In this respect Gorman follows what Alberta Arthurs has recently described as a

disturbing pattern of excluding the arts and artists from definitions of "culture." See Alberta Arthurs, "Taking Art Seriously," *American Arts*, (Fall, 1996).

4. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) and Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) are fine historical presentations of popular culture nearer the turn of the century.

Paul Groth. *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. xxii, 401 pp. Illustrations, graphs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. $35 Cloth.

Henry Cisneros, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, recently announced with pride that more than 65 percent of American families lived in privately owned homes. This astounding figure testifies to the enduring success of a sixty-year-old federal housing policy whose principal aim is to advance single-family home ownership. But this statistic also raises questions about the social costs of such a singular policy for, as persisently high foreclosure and housing turnover rates attest, mortgages are clearly failing to deliver adequate and appropriate shelter to many Americans.

In *Living Downtown*, architectural historian Paul Groth closely examines the history of the residential hotel, a housing alternative which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by serving a remarkably diverse clientele. From opera divas and corporate executives on-the-make to single laborers and wage-earning women, Americans of many stripes found the prospect of a privately-owned home either personally undesirable or untenable and frequently chose instead to rent rooms (or just a bed) in city centers by the day, week, or month. Despite (or perhaps because of) its success in meeting diverse shelter needs of men and women who often valued their freedom from patriarchal family structures or domestic responsibilities, the residential hotel acquired an unseemly reputation in the dominant culture and ultimately met its demise at the hands of reformers intent on eradicating any "congregate form of living" within the twentieth-century American city (201).

Living Downtown traces the rise and decline of the residential hotel by combining the techniques and insights of conventional social history with those of architectural criticism, city planning, and public policy studies. Making ample use of photographic and other visual evidence, Groth supplements his readings