



WARREN SUSMAN

Tuning In Warren Susman

By Paul Buhle

CULTURE AS HISTORY

By Warren I. Susman
Pantheon, \$22.95; \$12.95, paper

The transformation of modern American sensibility, Warren Susman observes in *Culture As History*, is revealed in the changing uses of the word "comfort." During the 19th century it signified "relief," as in the little homemade relief bags Civil War soldiers carried, with buttons, soap, and the Bible ("the Lord is my comforter") inside. By 1900, "comfort" had more nearly acquired its contemporary meaning, one of those basic if intangible freedoms no American should do without; public bathrooms had already become "comfort stations." By now the word connotes access to a VCR, a good tape deck, a weekly restaurant dinner, and at least an occasional satisfactory sexual encounter. Once, Americans marched grimly through their vale of tears, armed against despair by their few worldly possessions and their hopes for spiritual reward; now they use cultural artifacts (along with all the accompanying fetishism) to construct self-identity.

And yet what Susman calls the "culture of abundance" has never really triumphed—not only because we are an island of plenty in a sea of world privation, but because hard work, self-denial, and their purported character-building qualities play an essential ideological role in our society. Listen carefully, if you can, to Reagan's platitudes. He obviously wants someone else to do the self-denying, but the right needs the myth of worthy minorities, women, and the entire third world always on the verge of upward mobility, if only they would try a little harder. Unfortunately, the left shares some of the same moral premises. Every gasp of intellectual revision at the TV habits of the masses conceals a whisper: *Why aren't those people out improving their minds? Why are they sitting on their asses?* Nearly a century into the consumer era, we still have a producer's hangover. Warren Susman knows why we're so muddleheaded, and he's spent decades working on a collective cure.

Culture As History is essentially a Greatest Hits collection of essays from 20 years' work. Almost a third of the book analyzes American myths, as created, perpetuated,

and steadily reformulated by intellectuals. The rest offers a careful reading of 20th century American culture, focusing on 1920 to 1940. What holds the book together is Susman's supreme belief in the power of history to cut through myth and to make truth available to a democratic public. What holds the book together, in other words, is Susman himself, unacknowledged magus of 20th century American history.

Back in the '60s, he was known as the luminous mind of the milieu that created *Studies on the Left*, the first radical journal to leave behind the degenerating Stalinist/Trotskyist/Social Democratic inter-cine quarrels. Susman had a unique sense of American history's own history, the continual reshuffling of facts and interpretations to meet the needs of each new era. Coming of age during the cold war—an undergrad-

ingly argues, the republic of the Founding Fathers ceased to exist by 1900, eroded by decades of government centralization and bureaucratic manipulation of public opinion. The more the new order developed, the more ideology filled the reality gap. Reagan's transparent show-biz style is only the culmination of the process. Falsifying history, one of the kept intellectuals' chief tasks, has become as blatant and unembarrassed as a Chevy commercial on the Fourth of July.

Susman also spent his graduate years locating those few American intellectuals who had studied society through cultural forms. Finding the cupboard practically bare, he dived into the raw images themselves. Rutgers students of the '70s remember him as the compleat cultural democrat, scandalizer of professorial procedures, showing

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ate supporter of Henry Wallace at Cornell—he had a particular grudge against the abuse of American history by reigning figures like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Richard Hofstadter, famous respectively for Trumanesque platitudes and hostility toward grassroots American radicalism.

"Intellectuals seem to have found a special function as missionaries preaching culture against growing anarchy," Susman says in "The Nature of American Conservatism," sounding like a judge who has found a distinguished statesman guilty of lies and coverups. Those intellectuals meant the defense of their cultural privileges against the unwashed; they had no positive vision beyond support for the A-bomb and hopes for a new mandarin class of gentlemen politicians. Young Susman wouldn't let them get away with it. The first essays in *Culture As History* still burn with the righteous indignation of 30 years ago. As Susman painstakingly

films in class years before that became fashionable, offering his own questions in Socratic dialogue with any undergraduate willing to speak up. When this august scholar had a heart attack, he told everyone that the best thing about intensive care was the free television.

He insisted, above all, that students become their own cultural historians. His earlier American history anthology, *Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945*, offered a veritable scrapbook of Americana he'd gathered over the years, from parts of Dale Carnegie's *How To Win Friends and Influence People* to the congressional attack on Mae West. *Culture As History* is the perfect companion piece. It details how cultural history came into existence in the 1930s, during the search for a "real America" (i.e., usable symbols to unite the nation) and how that history might develop if scholars would stop segregating one part of the cul-

ture from another—if Mickey Mouse could be treated alongside Franklin Roosevelt, *It Happened One Night* with the World's Fair and world war.

Recalling images from the depression that ended in the 1890s, Susman finds that "many people began to dream of the possibility of a world based on fabulous plenty." New institutions like department stores, bathing beaches, amusement parks; new music (syncopated and sexual); new pulp magazines and comics; telephones and cars transformed popular consciousness. These products of the culture, Susman argues, became walking advertisements for its grandeur. And when new expectations crowded self-denial and divine guidance out of the picture, ordinary people began to see themselves as more than a means to some higher purpose. No wonder the U.S. rather than Stalin's Russia or Mao's China invented the "cult of personality." However absurd or banal the forms—the glib pursuit of "popularity" through mouthwash, the hope for bourgeois respectability with a Buick, the pitiful sacrifices for the appearance of good health ("Have a Lucky Instead of a Sweet")—desire had become the juice in society's engine.

Meet left-wing critics before Susman drew dour conclusions from such changes in mass behavior. Interestingly enough, Greenwich Village intellectuals of 1910-20 had been utterly fascinated with mass culture, from the popular stage show to the slum street scene. But as resurgent capitalism triumphed over the radical threat, they and their successors soured on the domestic proletariat. The arrival of Russian-style Communism made that disillusionment fashionable, just as cultural criticism was becoming an art form. Lots of Communist or Popular Front types, from Langston Hughes to Woody Guthrie to Lillian Hellman, actually participated in the upsurge of democratic and folksy cultures by the 1930s-40s. But cultural theory fell to the exiled Frankfurt School and their fellow pessimists, the left-turning-right *Partisan Review* crowd for whom mass culture spelled the eclipse of the last available utopia, Art with a capital "A." Clement Greenberg, whose 1938 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" roamed the depths of disdain (his memorable phrase about popular literature, "vicarious experience for the insensitive," pretty much sums up the whole idea), declared two decades later that even the study of mass culture fatally infected the intelligent observer.

Susman never agreed, and he has lived to see his rejection of snobbery vindicated. The new left flowered in the bright sun of personal transformation. Popular culture supplied the metaphors and the artifacts, from Beatles to bongas. Marshall McLuhan, despite his personal conservatism, glamorized the theory of media while the video politics of war and demonstrations drove home the proof. Radical journalism about rock shook the left intellectuals' fixation on categories like high and mass art. Ultimately the categories returned, but they never regained intellectual prestige. Only the older generation and their stuffy academic protégés could maintain a stymied hostility toward all mass culture. Who else would care what the rapidly aging New York Intellectuals still around from the '30s had to say about Dylan or Woodstock? Already Susman had won a moral victory. But not yet a scholarly one.

By the early '70s, serious discussion of communications and popular culture had at last taken hold. According to Paul Lazarsfeld, pioneer '40s theorist, the collapse of the '60s social movements left nothing but depoliticized culture to chew over; meanwhile the anticipation of VCRs, cable, and other consumer-friendly high tech items encouraged scholarship and guaranteed its institutional support. Postmodernism had arrived. The rise of the women's movement also helped bring "new" issues to the surface and reveal significance in aspects of daily life previously taken for granted. By the mid-'70s, when romantic visions of a counterculture had given way to gritty realism, radical thinkers also began to regroup. New journals (including *Cultural Correspondence*, which I then published) conducted more discussions—and more intelligent discussions—about popular film, TV,

comic strips, and other such "B" phenomena than all previous U.S. art publications combined. Mainstream criticism of popular culture also improved, from the back sections of the newsweeklies to the TV column in the local paper. Meanwhile, a post-new left group of intellectuals, studying everything from sitcoms to nurse novels, began to emerge from the graduate schools. A little too young for the breathless '60s, they were radicals in a new key. Their books, just now being published, can be seen as the grandchildren of Susman's efforts, their accomplishment his real reward.

Culture As History, the venerable *yeide*, is in some ways dated. Susman concentrated exclusively on middle-class culture; more

recent studies have gone to the sources of cultural innovation—like the immigrant shoppirls in turn-of-the-century Coney Island who picked up jazz dancing and spread it to their social betters. We would, to take another example, no longer view Garthwn and Aaron Copland as emblematic of '30s American music, now that the mass popularity of Mississippi Blues Yodeler Jimmie Rodgers, blueswoman Bessie Smith, or for that matter the polka giants of yesteryear has come more clearly into focus. Nor does Susman's dismissal of Popular Front culture, in its attempts to reshape popular music, literature, and film to quasipolitical purposes, now seem fair to '30s cultural activists. Neoconservative doyens have

abused their own power, but the CP's cultural commissars could. And we've learned how difficult radical intervention into popular culture can be, how far interventionists are driven to reduce their message to symbols. In general, we have grown up beyond the premises of Susman's detailed work.

But this does not diminish the book or Susman's stature. He had to be there. And those who immerse themselves in the pages of *Culture As History* will come away with something as useful to filmmaker or musician as to historian or budding critic. Our mass history can be understood. Understanding is itself an act of resistance to ideology and a blow for freedom. ■



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Sussing It Out

By Richard Yesselson

When Warren Susman talks, people listen. There's an exuberance about him that's palpable. In 17 years of teaching at Rutgers, he has become a cult figure to his students and to a host of historians who glowingly acknowledge his influence. This makes the publication of his first book, *Culture As History*, an event.

Susman did it his way. He yanked his thesis (on American expatriates in France between the wars) from a publisher at the last moment because he wasn't satisfied with it. Later articles appeared in what one reviewer has called "inaccessible places"—a remark that amuses Susman. After his first essay was rudely rejected by a prestigious journal ("They wouldn't even read it. They said the intellectual and the American frontier is a stupid subject..."), he swore he would never send off another article. "Nothing of mine has ever been published unless somebody asked for it," he says. "I'm crazy. I've broken all the rules. I should be dead on the street somewhere. I tell my students not to do what I did." Crazy like this we should all be. Susman stands in the tradition of Americanists, including Charles Beard and Carl Becker, who see history as a moral presence engaging the future as much as the past. His analysis complements the theoretical work of Clifford Geertz, Raymond Williams, and Fredric Jameson; but as a student of American life, he speaks directly to his audience in a way they can't.

During a wide-ranging conversation in his Rutgers office, Susman touched on many of his favorite topics—from his interest in the power of historical thinking and the possibilities for American socialism to his doubts about the ability of American leftists and intellectuals to understand modern America. "I know there are some who think socialism will come through the Democratic Party. That'll be the day," he says. "For four years, socialists argue there's no fundamental difference between the two parties, but when election day comes, they vote Democratic, and they will till the day they die. No matter how bad Reagan is, I couldn't stomach the prospect of voting for Walter Mondale." But while Susman chastises leftists for voting with the mainstream, in some respects he's changed his tune from 10 years ago, when he argued that 20th century American socialism had fundamentally the same appeal as "Americanism"—a promise of equality, scientific rationality, and technological beneficence. "Now I find myself critical of the left's lack of interest in Americanism. We shouldn't separate ourselves from all things in America that remain viable. It's pretty hard to say that capitalism was a failure in this country. It certainly wasn't a complete success in terms of what it promised, but it did produce certain kinds of things that were of benefit to a great many people." He quickly adds, "That doesn't mean we accept the system. It means we debate it in ways which offer a significant alternative."

He's convinced, for instance, that contempt for mass culture is bad for the left both tactically and ethically. "These people sitting in front of the television set are *the people*," he says heatedly. "They are not automatons. They make choices, even if only what TV show to watch or which fast-food restaurant to go to. I don't care, whatever it is, they make choices. How can you demean these people and at the same time try to convince them to be part of the new socialist order? What do these people think about what you think about them?" Though Susman is very much a citizen of the modern world, he does champion 19th century American conservatives like John Adams and William Graham Sumner. "The thing that was admirable about them was the strength and integrity of their analysis. They were willing to look deeply at society. And they stuck to their guns no matter where it led them. This was rare from liber-



als and the left." Comparing these men to the contemporary right, Susman says, "I don't think the new guys are conservatives. They're reactionaries. Real conservatives have an analysis of the way society works. The new people are frightened and emotional. They represent no thought." Susman finds something uncomfortably similar to the new right's fear of social change in the thought of such left anti-modernists as Jackson Lears and Christopher Lasch. Their work "plays into that sense that there once was a world where things were better. I think that's wrong." Susman chooses his words carefully, situating himself at the uneasy crossroads where long friendships and profound disagreements meet: "Christopher Lasch is one of the most brilliant people I know. But there is a memorialization of the 19th century in his work that isn't doing us any good. The 19th century wasn't that good. Look at the family, for example." Susman insists that history is not the exclusive province of Ph.D.s: "Historians aware of their own supposed lack of authority in

the modern world think that no one cares about history. I think that's just false. No matter what the historians say, there is a vision of the past upon which Americans decide what to do. Carl Becker said you couldn't even put on your clothes in the morning without a sense of the past, and I think that's true about larger issues as well." As Becker said, "Everyone can be a historian." Consider the two Fords, John and Henry. Susman argues that John Ford "developed a vision of America dealing both with particular historical moments and an attitude toward history, the relationship between society and government." Given the vast numbers of people exposed to this vision, he believes that the film director may be "the most influential historian we've ever had, regardless of whether he meets the canons of the historical profession." On Henry Ford, Susman cuts through the ideological uses of a hoary piece of Americana: "Henry Ford, as everyone knows, said 'History is bunk.' Then he built a great historical museum. Why? Because he was interested in the history of what people made and how they worked. He wasn't interested in Aaron Burr and presidents and that sort of thing, but he was interested in a different kind of history."

Susman notes that after World War II, "historians became more specialized, more unapproachable. There are advantages to specialization, but there are fewer and fewer people who speak to a broad audience." The booming cottage industry of new labor historians fails to address such an audience, and therein lies a great paradox: a generation of leftist historians, whose own movement—the New Left—was hindered by ahistoricism, turned to writing history. They produce technically brilliant accounts of yesterday's laboring masses that today's workers neither know nor care about. "I admire this work immensely, but it doesn't give people anything. It can't explain how we got from the 19th century to the 20th, to the strange world we live in today." The new labor history, Susman suggests, is more likely to glorify history as a frozen moment in time than to empower people. He thinks that women's and gay history have been more successful connecting with their audience.

Needless to say, Susman's ideas disturb some of his colleagues. They want proof—but persuasion, not proof, is what he's about: "Culture is rhetoric. History is part of that rhetoric. The most important things, the hidden assumptions of a society, we don't say, because we don't have to persuade ourselves about them. Everything else is part of a debate. How this relates to truth and social practice is a serious question. I don't think history repeats itself, but I do believe historical generalizations can give people a sense of how they fit into the larger world. History can lead to some sort of understanding, *Verstand*. I know understanding is a mystical word, but what the hell else can one do? Understanding can help you to act, give you some kind of awareness. That's the game we're playing. It's not science." ■