

Radical History Review

RADICAL HISTORY REVIEW



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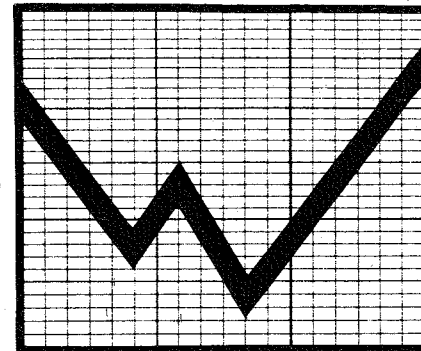
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Class and Culture: Reflections on the Work of Warren Susman

Michael Denning

This talk was given to the University Seminar on the History of the Working Class at Columbia University on December 10, 1985, as part of a Panel in Honor of Warren Susman.

Speaking of Warren Susman's work to a seminar on working class history is somewhat incongruous, for he was a historian of the "forms, patterns and symbols" of the "enormous American middle class." "The story of American culture," he wrote, "remains largely the story of this middle class." (192).¹ The cultural transformations of the twentieth century in the United States, he argued, the emergence of a "culture of abundance"—a culture whose key words were publicity, leisure, and dreams—a culture that forged a new psychic model, or "personality," was the product of a new middle class of managers, professionals, and technicians—the salaried bureaucrats of advertising, research and development, and the culture industries. Character to personality, theology to therapy, producer to consumer: this has been a remarkably persuasive model for historians of American culture over the last decade, and in much of that work one finds the telltale footnote to one or another of Warren Susman's essays. By the time *Culture as History* appeared in 1984, not only had his arguments and speculations come to shape American cultural studies, but the representative figures he wrote and spoke on—The Wizard of Oz, Simon Patten, Bruce Barton, the 1939 New York World's Fair—had become a sort of counter-canon of American studies.

What is the relation of the culture of American workers to this culture of abundance, this culture of personality? Is there an American working class culture, or is the story of American culture largely the story of old and new middle classes? Though the works of the "new labor history" have transformed our understanding of American workers, few, if any, historians of the working class have challenged the overall map of American culture, particularly for the twentieth century. If we wish to understand American culture less

as the story of the hegemony of the middle class, than as the condensation of class conflicts—at turns mediated, heightened, or displaced by the new industries of culture—then we must pay close attention to Susman's practice of cultural history. I want to mention briefly three aspects of that practice: his uses of mass culture, his self-consciousness about words, and his recovery of the utopian origins of our "culture of abundance."

There is no working class culture that is not saturated with mass culture. The same historical transformations that produce a proletariat labor power as a commodity, produce a mass culture, culture as an "immense accumulation of commodities." From the penny press and the dime novel to the \$64,000 question and the million-dollar movie, cheap commodities of culture, entertainment and leisure are present in working class communities from the beginnings of a working class. How are we to understand these commodities? The three most common ways are, I think, inadequate. First, there is the sense that they are agents of mass deception and manipulation, eroding and dissolving the traditional working class culture, and establishing the hegemony of middle class ideologies. Second, there is the contrary sense that these are indeed expressions of the dreams and fears of the nation, that they are a popular culture. Given the character of these artifacts, this often leads one to the conclusion that there is no distinct working class culture in the United States. The third possibility, prompted perhaps by the seemingly intractable opposition of the first two, is basically to ignore them, to dismiss these commodities as escapist and meaningless, and to get on to the serious business of social and political history.

As someone who argues that Mickey Mouse may be more important to the understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt, Susman rejects out of hand the escapist argument: "Escapism may indeed be an issue," he says, "but why and how people choose to escape in the particular ways they do—the choices the culture provides—is a much more important question." (102) Neither condemning nor celebrating the commodities of mass culture, Susman's essays offer a perspective needed by those who would examine the place of those commodities in working class cultures. Let me pursue this with a classic example, the stories of Horatio Alger. The Alger stories are usually treated, as Susman notes, "as hymns to American middle-class concepts of success." (244) Though less stories of rags to riches than of rags to respectability, their popularity is taken as a sign of the power of middle class ideals of mobility and self-made men, and of the consent given to those ideals by American workers. One can, of course, qualify this by arguing over the readers of Alger. Susman claims that Alger aimed at rural and small-town audiences and that "many

city-dwellers found the works foolish and without interest." (244) Daniel Rodgers has generalized this, arguing that "success literature was many things but it was not a literature aimed at the industrial wage earner."²

But the Alger case is more complicated than this. For Alger did publish work in the story papers and dime novel series aimed at industrial workers; his "reforming" fiction, however, used the sensational format as a ventriloquist's dummy, trying to capture and reshape its audience. If one looks closely at the sensational fiction of the late nineteenth century, one finds not only Alger but (along with tales of outlaws and tramps) a genre of stories with young workingman heroes. Though these often look like Alger tales, with their emphasis on temperance and self-improvement, and share elements of that "culture of character" that Susman has delineated, they are told in distinctive mechanic accents. Not only do they take boys in the workshop or factory as their subject (unlike Alger), but their plots are never resolved with individual success. Their often labored endings all attempt to unite the individual's successful climb up the ladder with a mutualistic solidarity with fellows in the workplace; to be, in the charged figure that often emerges, a "knight of labor."³

One might conclude from this brief example that the terrain of commercial culture is contested, that it does not belong to one class or another. Individual producers may attempt to reshape and appropriate its genres and conventions; nevertheless, those conventions and figures remain multi-accentual. Different classes share words, characters and metaphors but do not share interpretations. The products of mass culture may be read in a variety of different ways. Susman gives us a fine example when he suggests that the Alger stories "may even have been enthusiastically purchased by many who did not believe in their basic value structure or who were not interested in the story as much as in the wealth of realistic detail," who took them as guidebooks to the city. (244) An adequate sense of the relation between classes and mass culture would need a variety of concepts that could suggest this multiplicity of uses and historical nature of cultural boundaries, concepts on the order of accenting, ventriloquism, gentrification, slumming.

The second point here has to do with Susman's self-consciousness about words:

The historian's world is always a world of words; they become his primary data; from them he fashions facts. He then can go on to create other words, propositions about the world that follow from his study of those data. . . each age has its special words, its own vocabulary. Because the rhetoric of an era often betrays the real — if often obscured — issues about the nature of a culture, it deserves serious examination. (xi-xii)

Susman's essays are an American equivalent of Raymond Williams' *Keywords*. They chart the history of "culture," "civilization," the "people," "personality." He is particularly sensitive to the words and concepts which are used not only by an era to define itself but by the historian. One regrets that he did not write on the word "class," that he did not trace the fortunes of "middle class."

The analysis of the rhetoric of class is a central aspect of cultural history, one which remains largely undeveloped for the United States. It consists of a fragile dialectic between three sorts of activity. First, the historical tracing of the word "class" and class terminology through popular narratives, political discourse, and academic and popular social observation. Second, a theoretical clarification of the notions and names of class that are useful and necessary in the analysis of American culture. And third, perhaps most difficult, the investigation of the figures of social cleavage that are not explicitly defined in class terms, but which neutralize, displace or intensify class conflicts. The sense that the story of American culture is the story of the middle class derives from the lack of a theoretical and historical interrogation of the issues of class structure, class formation and class rhetoric. The recent disagreement between Michael Schudson and Dan Schiller over the characterization of the penny press audience is a fine example of how differing ascriptions of class can shape the interpretation of cultural formations.⁴

Finally, I want to note that Warren Susman's account of the utopian origins and radical possibilities of what he came to call the "culture of abundance" is an important corrective to the nostalgia not only of left cultural critics (whom Susman explicitly addresses) but of historians of working class culture. "Perhaps," he writes, "there is still hope for a radical rebuilding of the world on the ideological vision of a culture of abundance. Perhaps this is the proper 'socialist' view. Only a careful study of history can provide us with the necessary knowledge and the special insights to see whether this is possible." (xxx) Warren Susman's history writing was an exemplary practice of Brecht's maxim: "Do not build on the good old days, but on the bad new ones."

Notes

1. All quotations from Warren Susman are from *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, (New York, 1984). Page numbers in parentheses.

2. Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920*, (Chicago, 1978), p. 39.

3. I have a fuller discussion of these dime novels in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, (London, forthcoming).

4. See Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, (New York, 1978); and Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism*, (Philadelphia, 1981).