
Review: *Abundant Cultural History: The Legacy of Warren Susman*

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ABUNDANT CULTURAL HISTORY: THE LEGACY OF WARREN SUSMAN

Robert B. Westbrook

Warren I. Susman. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. xxx + 321 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$22.95 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

My first encounter with Warren Susman was in the early 1970s when he came to Stanford, where I was a graduate student, to give a talk on American culture in the 1930s. He appeared in a bright red blazer stretched across his (then) expansive girth and delivered what was, to use his favorite superlative, a brilliant lecture, focusing, as did much of his work on the twenties and thirties, on the ambivalent response of Americans to modernity. Much of his analysis on this occasion centered on Walt Disney, and what I recall best about the talk was an exchange he had with a member of the audience who questioned Susman's characterization of Disney as an ambivalent modernist by pointing to the daring use of bare-breasted nymphs in *Fantasia*. "Very observant," Susman responded with undisguised glee as he looked out over his glasses at his questioner, "but recall that the breasts had no nipples!"

I mention this incident because it seems to me to encapsulate many of the engaging qualities of Susman's work: his adventurous exploration of unorthodox sources, his close attention to the telling detail, his enthusiastic response to the insights of others, and his puckish delight in his own discoveries. Unfortunately, this work was often hard to come by. Susman published very little, and what little he did publish was often in relatively obscure journals and anthologies. He was a master of the occasional piece, and those of us who eagerly followed his work find our files filled not only with faded xeroxes of the few pieces that he published but also with his *samizdat*: unpublished articles, lectures and talks, letters, reports on manuscripts, napkins with notes from conversations in the coffeeshops of convention hotels. Although he was among the most unprofessionalized of historians, Susman gave much of his life's energies to professional occasions, and it was in the midst of such an occasion that he died last spring.

Despite the tireless service he offered to the historical profession, Susman was not, as I say, a model professional. Occasional pieces were not only his

forte, they were his *oeuvre*. He never published his fine dissertation on American expatriates in France, and, he told an interviewer that "nothing of mine has ever been published unless somebody asked for it. I'm crazy. I've broken all the rules." Susman not only survived these transgressions, he flourished, and few have exercised a greater influence as a teacher on contemporary American cultural history. Nonetheless, it is fortunate that he was finally cajoled into publishing this collection of his essays, for it may provide an audience for his ideas somewhat broader than that he was able to reach as what one disciple termed the "unacknowledged magus of 20th century American history."¹

This audience, it should be said, will have to accustom itself to the frustrations as well as the rewards of reading Warren Susman. His essays are always too brief. They inevitably end just as the reader thinks Susman has got up to speed, and many of his interpretations stand naked of the evidence required to make them persuasive. "The ideal essay," he wrote in a half-disguised moment of self-reflection, "would be formulated to include a few carefully chosen texts, preferably anthropological. The texts would be followed by several significant caveats, as prelude to a series of assertions — bold ones, of course — that in a speculative essay may stand free of ordinary proof of demonstration. And one should finish with a peroration sufficiently eloquent that one's readers would fail to recall the author's many errors" (p. 252). This is a pretty good description of the form of Susman's own discourse, although his texts were usually literary (preferably middlebrow) and he often skipped the caveats. He sprinkled the intellectual landscape with bold assertions and pregnant insights, many of which others picked up and developed.² My sense is that Susman was well-aware of this and took some pleasure in it. Great teacher that he was, he wrote to be ripped off.

Culture as History collects much of Susman's work over the past twenty-five years. There are some of his published articles that are missing, and I suspect I am not alone in regretting the absence of some of the unpublished pieces to which he refers in his footnotes.³ This collection also does not fully reflect Susman's engagement with mass culture, which is unfortunate given his important role in legitimating the study of the artifacts of the mass media. Although he asserts in his introduction to one part of the book that "Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt," Mickey does not make an appearance in any of the essays (nor, alas, do the nippleless nymphs), and there is little analysis of popular forms like television, which Susman watched all the time and about which he had some very interesting things to say. Nonetheless, despite these omissions, the book does provide a good sense of many of Susman's concerns and virtues: his attentiveness to the ways in which Americans have used and

abused their past, his ability to combine a deeply radical sensibility with an appreciation of the conservative tradition, and his fine grasp of the ambivalence with which Americans greeted modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.

Like most authors of collected essays, Susman remarks that the opportunity to put together a book like this revealed "a deeper sense of order, progression, and even purpose in their chronological sequence over the past quarter century than I had suspected." He discovered that "I was developing almost unconsciously a way of understanding American culture: I was coming to see America through the notion of the 'culture of abundance'" (pp. xix-xx). As is usually the case, this authorial claim is not altogether persuasive, and the relevance of this unifying theme to many of these essays—which range from a revealing analysis of eastern, *antifrontier* "Turnerism," to an appreciative tribute to John Adams and other American conservatives, to a critique of the presumption of an antiurban prejudice of American intellectuals—is difficult to discern. It does, however, tie together the essays on the culture of the twenties and thirties and the important piece on "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," and these are the richest and most important articles in the book.

Modern American culture, Susman argues in his introductory essay, has been marked by a fundamental conflict between two cultures, "two different moral orders," between "an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance." The struggle between these cultures was a battle of "rival perceptions of the world, different visions of life," a battle that was "never merely or even centrally political." The newer culture of abundance was the product of the communications and organizational "revolutions" of the nineteenth century, and it was borne, above all, by the new middle class of managers, professionals, white-collar workers, technicians, and engineers produced by these revolutions. At the heart of this ascendant culture was a new "modal psychological type." Whereas the older culture called for the development of "character" grounded in moral rectitude, the new culture "insisted on 'personality,' which emphasized being liked and admired." This "culture of consumption" was marked by new technologies and institutions—electric lights, color photography, the department store, the automobile; new cultural forms—the comics, radio, movies, advertising, pulp magazines; and new "keywords"—plenty, play, leisure, recreation, self-fulfillment, public relations, celebrity. The culture of abundance was greeted with alarm by proponents of the old worldview, and, Susman suggests, "the crucial and perhaps climactic stage" of the confrontation of these two visions occurred in the 1920s and 1930s (pp. xx-xxvi).

This is a useful framework for the analysis of modern American culture, although it is hardly new (Susman is uncharacteristically reticent in acknowledging his debts to David Riesman and others who have advanced a similar argument), and it provides a purchase on ideological conflicts right up to the *Kulturkampf* of the 1980s.⁴ But one should bear in mind that "Puritan-republican culture" and the "culture of abundance" are ideal types so as not to lose sight of the interesting ways in which, in many instances, Americans have expressed an ambivalent loyalty to both. Susman explores these ambivalences in the essays on the interwar years that form the heart of this collection, fixing upon those individuals and institutions like Henry Ford, Bruce Barton, Babe Ruth, Colonial Williamsburg, and the New York World's Fair of 1939 that embodied the "cultural contradictions of a consumer society." Ford, for example, probably did more than any other single individual to democratize the culture of abundance, yet he was never fully comfortable with the world he had helped create. In the latter years of his life, he waxed nostalgic for the past and invested his energies in folk dancing, in the republication of McGuffey's *Readers*, and in Greenfield Village, a mythic reconstruction of the Puritan-republican world he had fled as a young man. Thus, Susman says, "we face a strange portrait: the man who invented the future now carefully rediscovering the past" (p. 140).

One of the best things about the essays on the 1930s is the way they historicize the very concept of "culture" that informs the practice of cultural history. As Susman shows in a compelling interpretation of documents ranging from the poetry of Archibald MacLeish to popular games to the ideology of the Popular Front, it was during the "red decade" that the concept of culture as (in Robert Lynd's words) "all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things, their material tools and their values and symbols" became widespread and, in the face of deep economic insecurity, served the profoundly conservative function of reassuring the middle class of the unity and shared purpose of the American "People." Even a radical like Kenneth Burke recognized the power of this concept, and he urged his comrades to replace the myth of the "worker" with that of the "people" in the wistful hope that this symbol could "borrow the advantages of nationalistic conditioning and at the same time be used to combat the forces that hide their class prerogatives behind a communal ideology" (p. 211).

This holistic concept of culture informed much of the cultural history of the 1950s, and Susman's essays are, in part, an effort to expose the ideological underpinnings of this historiography. A culture, he reminds us, "is defined by its tensions. . . . Cultures can actually be arguments or debates themselves" (p. 288). Nonetheless, Susman himself occasionally succumbed to holism and

lost sight of the special difficulties that arise in analyzing a society in which culture has become a commodity. Like most cultural historians trained in intellectual history, he was a supply-side historian who examined the lives and texts of the producers of middlebrow and mass culture, although he occasionally gestured toward the study of the experiences of the consumers of this culture (see, for example, his intriguing proposal for a study of the photographs taken by visitors to the World's Fair). There is a tendency among such historians to be unduly defensive about this in the face of the populist criticisms of social historians who have themselves latched onto the concept of culture, but, as long as one does not exceed the reach of the evidence at hand, there is no reason for those who study elites to cultivate an inferiority complex. Susman was not always wary of the limits of his evidence in this respect, claiming that his work looks at "how people make their own history and examines the popular forms through which that history is expressed" (pp. 101-02). It is not the forms themselves, however, but the way they are used and understood that constitutes popular expression in a consumer culture, and about this Susman had little to say. Yet he had a great deal of interest to say about the cultural expression of the producers of the culture of abundance, and this should not be gainsaid.

Susman's mischaracterization of his work grew, I think, out of his own deep-seated populism, which finds expression in the attack in the introduction to these essays on cultural historians like Christopher Lasch and Jackson Lears and other sharp critics of the therapeutic ethos of consumer culture. Such critics, Susman says, "are clearly unhappy living in this century. They have little sympathy for anything that is for the masses, seeing always some sort of fascism or Stalinism around the corner." They "speak from a position of the Left but end up extolling the values and institutions of the older capitalist order of the nineteenth century." Their unremitting hostility to modernity blinded these historians to the "utopian possibilities" of the culture of abundance and inhibited a "dialogical or dialectical reading of both its repressive and its liberating possibilities." This dialectical approach, Susman concludes, "does not eschew critical evaluation: it insists on making distinctions, on understanding first and criticizing from some stated positions afterward" (pp. xxix-xxx).

There is much that is sensible in this, but it not only caricatures the arguments of most critics of consumer culture but also slights Susman's own affinities with them. Susman cites his essay on "Socialism and Americanism" as a warning against a radical nostalgia for the old order, but in fact this essay is an attack on socialists for uncritically absorbing the values of consumer culture. The essay ends with a tribute to the critical acumen of the Southern Agrarians, precisely the sort of appreciation of the radical implications of

conservative antimodernism that one associates with Jackson Lears. Susman never clarifies what he means by the utopian possibilities of consumer culture and never fully articulates a position to compare with the political, moral, and religious perspective from which Lasch, Lears, and others have advanced their critique. This is not to say that such a position is inconceivable, only that Susman here is content with bold assertion.

Behind Susman's defense of the dialectical character of modern American culture lay a growing concern that critical cultural historians in the United States would move beyond an attack on the repressive dimensions of mass culture to a contempt for those who consume it and thereby cut themselves off from a public deeply interested in its past. Shortly before he died, Susman remarked that "these people sitting in front of the television set are *the people*. They are not automatons. . . . 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?"⁵ History, Susman was convinced, was important to these people, even if historians were not. "It will continue to be used, mythically or ideologically, whether we like it or not," he observed. "Debates over the nature of the past are not merely textbook exercises for our students, demonstrating the difficult task of obtaining the truth. They are (consciously or not) public debates over values and developments that count in culture" (pp. 40-41). Susman saw himself as, first and foremost, a participant in these debates. I suspect that death will not still his participation, for he has left a rich legacy of leads for cultural historians and citizens to follow. Sadly, he will no longer be around to delight in his exploitation.

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1. Richard Yeselson, "Sussing It Out," and Paul Buhle, "Tuning In Warren Susman," *Voice Literary Supplement* (April 1985), pp. 21, 20.

2. The most notable case of this is perhaps Richard Pells's *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (1973), a book dedicated to Susman, that builds a full and rich interpretation of American culture and social thought during the depression on the foundation of the latter's notions about the 1930s.

3. I would say the most notable omission is the important article, based on Susman's dissertation, on American expatriation in the 1920s: "A Second Country: The Expatriate Image," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 3 (1961/62): 171-83.

4. See Kristen Luker's penetrating study of *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984), which discovers a conflict of cultural and moral perception between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" activists that fits quite well into Susman's schema.

5. "Sussing It Out," p. 21.