

actually has the potential to be of great interest to many others besides. Yet the analysis here does not really do justice to the topic. Racism is taken as a constant, whereas in all western countries it fluctuated in intensity, particularly in the course of the nineteenth century. Abolitionism is dealt with largely in terms of formal organizations and personalities. The author is very aware of the broader context, and indeed in the British case has called on primary sources, mainly in the form of provincial newspapers, to enlarge our knowledge. Yet the great themes and paradoxes that have preoccupied Eric Williams, Eric Foner, James Macpherson, David Davis, Seymour Drescher and others — and have generated such intellectual excitement in the last few decades — are absent in these pages. Indeed, of the three secondary sources that the author relies on most for the British background one, is over twenty years old and another was published in 1926. In the American case, George Frederickson's 1971 book, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, is put to good use. The author's subject is clearly nineteenth-century Ontario, not the Western World, but it seems a lost opportunity not to have called on more of the rich body of ideas developed to explain race, abolitionism and the activities of ex-slaves in other circum-Atlantic contexts.

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Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (New York: The New Press 1992).

In a 1948 speech entitled "The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States," the African-American author Chester Himes argued that an honest look at the effects of racism on black Americans would reveal a process of scarring that has wreaked considerable psychic havoc. If this plumbing for the truth reveals within the Negro personality homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-Semitism, arrogance, Uncle Tomism, hate and fear and self-hate, this then is the effect of oppression on the human personality. These are the daily horrors, the daily realities, the daily experiences of an oppressed minority.

Unfortunately, Himes' insight has become clouded over the last three decades by the polemics of the scholarship on race. Since the publication of Stanley Elkins' *Slavery*, (1959) the debate has become largely polarized over the extent to which African Americans succumbed to or resisted the dehumanizing aspects of racism. On the left, scholars usually have emphasized both the oppressive nature of racism in the United States and the history of resistance on the part of black Americans. But, as Peter Novick has pointed out, this vision presents the same fundamental problem Dwight Macdonald once identified as central to socialist theory — if the capitalist system was as dehumanizing as its critics maintain, then it must have done irreparable psychological damage to its victims. However, if the working-class tradition was one of noble resistance to capitalism, then could the system really have been so brutally oppressive as its critics contend?

The advantage, then, of a book like this is that it largely escapes the parameters which have limited the academic debate on the issue of race. The subjects of Terkel's oral history are willing to confront the contradictory and even pathological effects of racism on both blacks and whites (as well as, on occasion, Hispanics and Asians). As a fifty-year-old African-American insurance broker tells Terkel:

Being black in America is like being forced to wear ill-fitting shoes. Some people adjust to it. It's always uncomfortable on your foot, but you've got to wear it because it's the only shoe you've got. You don't necessarily like it. Some people can bear the uncomfot more than others. Some can block it from their mind, some can't. When you see some acting docile and some acting militant, they have one thing in common: the shoe is uncomfortable. It always has been and always will be. (136)

The ramifications of that cultural deformation are evident today in many of the responses of the black community. As Salim Muwakkil, an African-American journalist, says,

I understand that black people needed some serious therapy to get us out of the situation we were in. It was historically unique, the legacy of slavery. The Nation of Islam tries to take a shortcut to cultural development through a totalitarian method, coercing people toward a certain kind of behavior. .

.. We have a hole in our psyche and [Louis] Farrakhan fills it up with ersatz culture. (167-168)

Or, as a thirty-one-year old black woman journalist says regarding the guilty verdicts of Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry and the youths who attacked and raped a jogger in New York's Central Park,

I was deeply disturbed, not by the verdicts, but by the insistence in the black community that the accused were innocent and the victims of racism. I think this sends a warped message to our young people that it's okay to do something wrong and you can get off on a racism rap. It's *not* okay. . . . We'll become a corrupt people if we allow ourselves to be lawless and claim that racism is responsible. (178)

The specter of Reaganism haunts the issue of race in the late-eighties and early-nineties. A white wife of a firefighter and mother of thirteen complains of the guilt she has been made to feel: "I went through a very bad time. I felt like being white middle-class had a real stigma to it. Everything was our fault.... Everywhere I went, it seemed like it was my fault." (102) But with Reagan's election, she no longer felt guilty for resenting welfare cheats who "get... away with things and laugh ... at you because you're paying taxes for it." (106) According to Rian Malan, a white South African who has lived in the United States since 1977, since Reagan's election, "The racism is so unashamed now. Being from South Africa, I'm obsessed with race. Any chance remark about race registers with me, click! I just sense the whole zeitgeist here has changed." (328)

The deindustrialization that has marked the Reagan-Bush years has had an especially severe impact on black Americans. The greatest success of the civil rights movement was the integration of the black middle class into the middle class as a whole. Ironically, this cut the traditional economic ties between the black middle class and the larger black community. Meanwhile, black working-class jobs have been lost as industries have increasingly fled the country. What has been left behind is a large urban class of blacks facing high unemployment rates and increasingly victimized by crime and drugs. At the same time the dominant political culture has encouraged those Americans who can afford it to adopt

private solutions to these public problems. They move to the suburbs, build walls around their communities, hire private security guards, and send their children to private schools. Douglas Massey, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, argues that as people disinvest in public solutions to urban problems in favor of private ones, crime grows worse, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle.

The subjects of Terkel's interviews are ambivalent about how much progress African Americans have made since the civil rights movement. A black woman organizer in Durham, North Carolina, can say that in the past ten years, "we've come an inch," and then turn around and, on the next page, state "I say we [have] come a long ways." (282-283) Interestingly, coming through many of the interviews is a sense that people have not lost faith in older-style liberal solutions, especially integration and education.

The major problem with this book is that it is hard to determine to what extent Terkel's own views are reflected in both whom he selected to interview and what subjects were covered. For example there are virtually no admitted racists included, but there are several reformed racists, most notably C.P. Ellis, a former Exalted Cyclops of the Durham Ku Klux Klan and now a civil rights worker. While Ellis' story is doubtlessly inspiring, it leaves the impression that in such individual conversion experiences lies the hope for better race relations — a dubious proposition, to say the least. Similarly, the repeated references by interviewees to Farrakhan makes one wonder if Americans are really obsessed with the man or if Terkel often injected the subject into the conversation (the fact that relatively few of Terkel's questions are reprinted adds to the confusion).

But as with Terkel's other oral histories, *Race* provides a portrait of Americans in all their ambiguities and paradoxes as they confront one of the central issues that defines what they are. As a white, eighty-year-old lawyer, long active in the civil rights movement, says, "It is the most obsessive feature of American life. Every American, whether white or black, carries with him the consciousness of race, always, always. Everywhere you go, even where there are no blacks." (288) Terkel is especially good at finding people who symbolize the contradictions at the core

of this fascination with race. He concludes, for instance, by interviewing Lloyd King, the child of a black father and white mother, a musician who loves jazz because of its mixture of European and African musical cultures. "The real tragedy between blacks and whites in America is not that we hate each other," King says.

Hatred by itself is a pretty shallow force and can only cut so deep. The real tragedy is that we love and admire each other. American culture as we know it would not exist if this weren't so. The tragedy lies in the complex folds of this love and admiration, which is somehow twisted into intolerance.... Like a Greek play, there would be no tragedy if it weren't for the love." (397)

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David Aers, ed., *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1992).

This collection of essays is introduced by Aers as an attempt, through "some reference to a defining community," to penetrate the "webs of interlocution" in which the "self exists" and in which it defines itself. This work — a cross-disciplinary effort uniting the talents of both literary critics and historians of culture — examines a selection of late medieval 'texts,' and focuses on a surprisingly cohesive set of aims and concerns. The contributors share both a distrust of the mythology that "has too often encouraged the projection of seamless unities onto the Middle Ages" (81) and a commitment to the relevance of the "text" to larger, "historical" issues. For while Aers is quick to point out that this collection of essays "never share the objectivist illusions of pre-critical positivism," he argues that "they are equally far removed from those who, under the sign 'Derrida,' have denied ... any distinction between true and false claims about the worlds human beings inhabit." (3)

Culture and History succeeds in traversing not only the boundaries separating various academic disciplines, but also discreetly warns against a kind of reverse elitism that may often detract from effective scholarship. As Lee Patterson's paper demonstrates, even

a text such as Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide*, cannot be seen as a mere "court frippery," as "the court is as real as anything else," and "triviality," after all, "can be used to represent reality as well as escape from it." (10)

Miri Rubin and Sarah Beckwith, in their examination of the dramatic and literary tradition surrounding, respectively, "The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities," and the "Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body" — as well as Peter Womack's treatment of the shifting composition of theatre audiences in the sixteenth century — follow Patterson's lead in viewing the text from "the level of conscious intention and topical relevance." (10) Yet all three place the most emphasis on the "text" in its function as a means to incorporate diverse and discordant voices straining at the outward integrity of the medieval community.

According to Rubin, "medieval religious culture possessed all the nuances usually associated with language, those of ... the normative and the aberrant, of acquiescence as well as subversion, of inclusion and exclusion." (43) Similarly, while Beckwith sees the fifteenth-century *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* as an attempt to "convert all its outsiders to insiders," she points out that "the very process of the incorporation cannot expel from its own dramatic rendering the riven ambiguities of the divided collectivity whose concern it stages." (65) This emphasis on marginalisation, and the cultural construction of the "Other" (i.e. in stories featuring the eucharist, the Jew or doubting woman) — which by definition contradicts a view of medieval society as harmonious and static — is one shared by all of the contributors to *Culture and History*.

For just as there is danger in "reading" the Middle Ages "like the clerical version of the host — whole in each of its little bits" instead of "as a dramatic process of relation," (81) so too should we beware of a "master narrative" which presents the medieval period as a simple "palindrome of modern life ... a pre-modern society and culture utterly foreign to the modern world that succeeded it." (147) Judith Bennet argues that this, especially in regards to women's history — a discipline that should strive to rewrite the "master narrative," and not "to buttress its crumbling foundations" (165) — sets up a false dichotomy "be-