

Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso 1996)

A couple of books in one, 556 pages long, original and interesting, only twenty-five dollars in hardback (the just-released paperback is five dollars less), Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* ought to be a bestseller. Needless to say, however, any serious work of left-wing social and cultural history is going to be swimming against the tide. First, there are likely to be problems getting books like Denning's published in the first place. Conglomerate buy-outs in the publishing business, whose consequences have been carefully monitored by industry critics like Andre Schiffrin, dramatically reduce the range of both fiction and nonfiction likely to reach readers. Second, even alternative houses like Verso (publishers of *Cultural Front*) still have to figure out how to get their titles into the bookstores. Finally, where titles out of the mainstream *do* manage to make it into the big chain bookstores (Verso, for example, seems to have done a good job getting portions of its trade list into Borders) there remains the problem of letting readers know the books are there, that they exist.

This task has been remarkably complicated by an unanticipated but parallel (and depressing) development within the new world of publishing. With a handful of significant exceptions (e.g., *Radical History Review*, *Monthly Review*, *Left History*), North America's left-wing media (magazines & newspapers/weeklies, monthlies & quarterlies) have survived the end of the cold war only to largely *abandon* reviewing left-wing books. Web pages for Amazon and Barnes & Noble make it easy to compare titles reviewed contemporaneously by a wide spectrum of periodicals and, to an amazing extent, the left press gives pride of place in its review pages to virtually the same books as those reviewed not only in the formerly liberal media (*N.Y. Times Book Review*, *New Republic*, *N.Y. Review of Books*, *Mother Jones*) and the more traditionally conservative media (*National Review*, *Commentary*, *Wall Street Journal*) but the most obviously ephemeral media as well (*Entertainment Weekly*, *Elle*, *Vanity Fair*). When mass circulation left-wing periodicals get their list of review titles from Oprah's Book Club, then you know that readers and writers on the left are in trouble. How could this happen? Denning quotes novelist Clancy Sigal's *Going Away*: maybe this is one more aspect of the defeat for which the left in the 1930s failed to prepare us.

Which books (in one) do I have in mind when describing *The Cultural Front*? First, there is the lengthy, detailed, and absorbing tale of the disparate cultural strands woven together by Denning to constitute the fabric of a cultural front which he sees stretching across the face of American history from the emergence of labour as a decisive factor in New Deal politics through what Denning regards as the end of "the thirties," around 1948, not coincidentally at about the same time that diplomatic historians and students of international relations tend to identify a "reverse course" in American policy abroad. Denning

attempts to trace both cultural politics, “the politics of allegiances and affiliations,” and aesthetic ideologies, “the politics of form” throughout this period. (xix) Who were the movers and shakers of the cultural front? At its heart, Denning argues, was a “new generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working class neighbourhoods of the modernist metropolis.” (xv) Of course these new artisans made alliances with a wide range of radicals in the culture industries — socialists, Communists, anarchists, liberal reformers, and a healthy sampling of misfits all of whom found a home at the front, at least for awhile.

The second book inside this big one is more about cultural theory than narrative history. In perhaps the single most important argument drawn from a myriad of large scale propositions he provides about the meaning of America’s Depression decade, Denning seeks the rehabilitation of cultural front aesthetics. Historian Jon Wiener has argued in *Reviews in American History* (December, 1997) that Denning successfully “recovers the left-wing culture of the 1930s from critics like Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe and historians like Warren Sussman, who described it as sentimental and shallow, as empty agitprop produced by fellow travellers misled into serving Stalin.” On the contrary, popular front culture had, in fact, a “breadth, depth, and significance that its critics have failed to see or understand.”

Wiener is surely correct in this assessment of Denning’s accomplishment. To take just one example from Denning’s long list of subjects (e.g., proletarian fiction, political theatre, progressive jazz, film noir, cabaret blues, experimental radio, radical animation), let us consider the Works Progress Administration (WPA) painters of the Federal Art Project. The “employment of young radical plebeian artists and writers by the relief projects,” claims Denning, “had profound effects, greater than might be imagined given the relatively short life of Federal One,” what the artists themselves routinely referred to simply as “the Project.” (79) Dore Ashton, in her classic account, *The New York School* similarly suggests that although the WPA provided a meal ticket for starving painters and permitted artists to work full time, for the first time, on their art, even more important was the way that “the Project” helped foster the emergence of an American art community, especially one centred in New York City. Both Ashton three decades ago and Carter Ratcliffe, in his new book on Jackson Pollock’s influence on postwar American art, quote Willem de Kooning’s comment about the unmatched and utterly extraordinary camaraderie of thirties WPA painters, who (the Depression notwithstanding) “were all happy to be in a city the beauty of which was unknown, uncorny, and not small scale.” Ashton even quotes Barnett Newman’s later claim that he “paid a severe price for not being on the project with the other guys; in their eyes I wasn’t a painter; I didn’t have the label.”

Denning observes in passing that “an unknown young radical painter, Jackson Pollock, was fired for being a Communist sympathizer.” (80) Pollock was “fired” or dropped from the Project a couple of times but neither Ashton nor

Ratcliffe discusses Pollock's politics. And without a doubt, of the various "isms," alcoholism would eventually play a larger role in the life of the New York School in general, and the life (and death) of Pollock in particular, than Communism. Philip Guston, probably the most politically committed of the New York School painters, was only one among many who struggled to get Pollock to break out of his self imposed isolation long enough to make the modest effort required by WPA administrators to justify another paycheck. Easel painters (in contrast to the mural division artists) had only to produce one 24 x 30 inch canvas a month to stay on relief. Guston told artist Burgoyne Diller that Pollock had shut himself up in his New York flat and was "drinking too damned much." When Diller went to try to revive Pollock, according to Ratcliffe, he discovered that this faithful student of T.H. Benton had progressed by leaps and bounds beyond the lessons — and style — of his mentor. Within just five or six years of that day, Pollock would have his first one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century gallery and the rest is history. After the war, the centre of gravity in the world art market shifted to New York and the abstract expressionists were widely seen as doing the most important painting done anywhere in the twentieth century.

So here's the irony. Denning is clearly right to rewrite the story of federal funding for the arts, circa the latter years of New Deal. "Atrocious" agitprop, or a poor art for a poor people, this clearly was not. The Project helped to bring into being not only a dynamic New York art scene but something which we can actually call the professionalization of the American artist. New York artists discovered to their astonishment that it might be possible to make a living painting. But the professionalization of art is not the same thing as what Denning means by the "laboring of American culture." "The continuity of the artistic life," points out Ashton, "which many experienced for the first time on the project, proved to be a catalyst that was to change the diffident American painter into a professional...."

In an odd way, the New Deal may have done the same thing for American (government) lawyers that it did for New York School painters: it provided a new avenue to the top. Denning acknowledges New Deal expansion of the state apparatus and specifically mentions radical lawyers who sought employment in Roosevelt's alphabet agencies, like Jerome Frank's Agriculture Adjustment Administration legal staff. But historian Jerold Auerbach, in *Unequal Justice*, has gone out of his way to show how youthful Roosevelt administration lawyers (Felix's Frankfurters, as they were sometimes called), "once they were certified as securities or anti-trust experts, moved with relative ease into the Protestant corporate professional establishment, leaving behind the ideal of committed service in the public interest as their abandoned legacy."

Did WPA artists do the same thing? There is, to be sure, a big difference between accepting public support for your work (so long as no strings are attached) and being an artist committed to public service (or left-wing art) what-

ever that might mean. Moreover, only a relative handful of New York painters eventually made it in the big time and they were, in my view virtually without exception, among the most talented artists of the century. And the more recent, and militantly, advanced thesis that abstract expressionist painting was actually cold war painting — an art devoted to the propagation of American imperialism and its values around the world during the 1950s — seems to me (and to cultural critics like Casey Blake) just silly. Nevertheless, beyond the valued notion of community, it is hard to see how the left-wing, working class, labour movement sentiments and ideologies of the 1930s left much of a mark on what would become the dominant form of American painting (and not incidentally, world art market kingpin) within just a few years of “the Project” folding its tent, a tent under which for a time so many had found shelter from the storm.

Denning devotes less space to federal programs for artists and writers than to his discussion of film, especially the work of Orson Wells, so perhaps it might also be useful to take a little bit closer look there as well. Wiener, in his review, questions whether Denning adequately makes the case for Wells’ anti-fascist art as the crowning achievement, in motion pictures, of the cultural front. Denning tries to extract Wells’ politics from the critique of (and fascination with) power deployed in so many of his films. John Berry, an assistant director to Wells in the Mercury Theatre and recently interviewed in Pat McGilligan and Paul Buhle’s *Tender Comrades*, describes Wells’ politics as simply “a wonderful, warm, human conception of what life should be...” Sounds good but is it on the left? Admittedly, Denning says that “Wells’s ambitions, accomplishments, and failures remain the most fitting emblem of the *unfinished* labours of the cultural front itself.” (402, emphasis added) But Denning *does* suggest that Wells’ film, *Touch of Evil*, representing what Wells’ himself described as his attack on the abuse of police power, at least metaphorically reflected the cultural front’s assault on the ideology of the fascist state. That the film was made a decade after Denning marks the demise of the front is not as important as the fact that it provides Denning with an optic through which Wells’ whole political contribution can retrospectively be viewed. “The Sleepy Lagoon case,” says Denning, “lies behind *Touch of Evil*...” But does it?

Denning describes the “framing of young Manolo Sanchez by the corrupt policeman Quinlan” in *Touch of Evil* as a “metamorphosis” of a California criminal case tried in 1942-43 which had drawn Wells’ attention. In this latter, “Sleepy Lagoon case,” Chicano teenagers landed murder convictions which Wells and other cultural front luminaries believed were a product not of justice but, rather, the “Nazi logic” of the Los Angeles police department. And Wells was onto something: the guilty verdicts were reversed on appeal. (399) Manolo Sanchez in Wells’ film, however, was *guilty* of murder — the very murder Quinlan tries to pin on him through outrageously illegal means. In a sense, Wells’ corrupt cop has more in common with Don Siegel’s Dirty Harry Callahan who, a decade later, similarly utilizes unconstitutional methods in an attempt to

convict a guilty man. Does anyone regard *Dirty Harry* as an anti-fascist film?

Denning actually quotes Wells saying that *Touch of Evil* convinced the French he was a fascist. But Denning then fails to pursue why, if Wells is serious, the French may have reacted as they did. The point here is obvious: most films — certainly those of Orson Wells, for reasons that Denning himself covers nicely — contain an enormous potential for being “read” differently by different audiences. Twenty years ago I looked at *Touch of Evil* the way Denning does now. By the time I wrote about it, ten years ago, in the *Wisconsin Law Review*, I had already begun to change my mind. That’s probably how some good films work. As the years go by, you turn them around in the light and maybe you see something you did not see before.

It is easy to say that a book’s capacity to provoke a conversation between reader and writer — its ability to reopen old questions and foster spirited debate over new ones — is by itself a sign that the author has done his or her work well. But it is true here in absolute fact. Michael Denning’s own labouring of American culture and politics is not only worth the modest price of admission but, more, the time and focus which nearly six hundred pages require. Like a good novel, you may be sorry when this book is over.

Tony Chase
Nova Southeastern University