



Nystrom, D. (1998). Review of *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. *Workplace*, 1, 114-116.

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**REVIEW OF MICHAEL DENNING'S
*THE CULTURAL FRONT: THE LABORING OF AMERICAN CULTURE IN
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY***

In this exhaustive reconstruction of the cultural formations that accompanied what he terms "the age of the CIO," Michael Denning offers a daring, revisionist account of the legacy of the Popular Front and the 1930s. He argues that the "cultural front reshaped American culture," constituting something like a "second American Renaissance" which transformed the political and cultural life of the nation (xvi). In order to prove this contentious assertion, Denning traces the often ignored imprints of left political affiliation and "laborist" aesthetic practice to be found in the work of such well-known figures as Duke Ellington, Orson Welles, William Carlos Williams, and Billie Holiday, and recovers some of the era's virtually forgotten artists, like blues singer Josh White and proletarian novelist Benjamin Appel. Furthermore, the book makes a powerful case for the importance of the period's political thought, maintaining that the writings of such theorists as Kenneth Burke, C.L.R. James, Oliver C. Cox, and Lewis Corey/Louis Fraina (the "American Gramsci," Denning suggests) constitute a nearly lost tradition of social and cultural analysis which American cultural studies must reclaim. The cumulative picture offered by Denning both expands our understanding of the cultural front's range and influence during the 30s and 40s, and underlines its importance as a case study in left cultural politics in the age of mechanical reproduction.

In presenting this picture, Denning contests the familiar characterization of the Popular Front, which descends from the *Partisan Review* intellectuals, as a Communist Party-inspired (and Moscow-controlled) program to disseminate a kind of sentimentalized, middlebrow populism in an effort to infiltrate the liberal wing of the New Deal. Rejecting this view, and its attendant narratives "of seduction and betrayal" (21), Denning suggests that we see the cultural front as the product of a "broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern classes" (6), a mass social movement of "non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with Communists and with liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture" (5). He also rejects the New York intellectuals' focus on the voluntarist notion of "commitment" in understanding and evaluating the period's cultural politics; instead, Denning deploys Raymond Williams's concept of "alignment"—that is, an attention to the way an artist both aligns herself and *is aligned by* the social context of her artistic activity. Denning thus addresses his study of the cultural front to both its "socially conscious" aspects as well as its "political unconscious" (58).

With this theoretical re-orientation, Denning turns our attention to the institutions, movements, cultural apparatuses, and audiences that shaped the culture of the Popular Front. He shows how this culture—which he characterizes as social democratic, laborist, anti-racist and -Fascist—was the product of both the

social movement built by and based out of the massive wave of unionization which marked the birth of the CIO as well as the unprecedented development of the culture industries. The newly organized industrial workers created not only the political context for the left cultural productions of the Popular Front, but also a new kind of audience for these productions; indeed, many of Denning's arguments for the inclusion of certain figures in his cultural front pantheon derive in large part from their popularity amongst these workers, as they (the artists) "forged an 'American' style out of the city styles of the black and ethnic working classes" (330). Furthermore, the rapid expansion of various mass media, and the development of the state cultural institutions of the New Deal, generated both a new class of worker—the cultural worker, whose own organization struggles Denning carefully recounts—as well as a new cultural environment, whose effects were hotly debated by the period's theorists and practitioners.

Denning's discussions of these debates mark some of the book's high points. He reminds us that many of the writings which we take to form the genealogy of "mass culture theory" were quite often specific responses to the cultural front itself. By thus historicizing these debates, Denning provides a useful corrective to the sort of cultural studies work that invokes this genealogy without acknowledging the particular historical conjunctures which produced them. Furthermore, Denning demonstrates how many of the cultural front's own artifacts meditated upon the political valences of the new "popular arts." For example, in one of the book's most persuasive interpretive passages, he narrates Orson Welles's career-long preoccupation with the power of the mass media, and his attempts to "create a 'people's culture' with the new means of communication, while fearing that the 'people' constituted by the apparatuses of mass culture were less a participating audience than a dispersed series of panicked individuals" (384). This ambivalent relationship reaches its apotheosis in *Citizen Kane*—the story, of course, of a Hearst-like media empire, which Welles turns into "a hall of mirrors in which the cultural apparatus sees itself" (385).

However, for Denning, most of Welles's works represent "ruins, incomplete fragments"(402)—a characterization which describes for him most of the products of the cultural front. More than once he cites Fredric Jameson's assertion that "the productive use of earlier radicalisms" must recognize "their tragic failure to constitute ... a tradition in the first place" (464), and Denning's case studies repeatedly view their cultural front artifacts as the ruins of a failed social movement: "far from being a foundational epic, [Dos Passos's] *U.S.A.* now stands ... as a tombstone for an America that no longer exists" (167); "the pragmatic Marxism of the young Sidney Hook is one of the ruins of the cultural front" (434). Of course, this is merely the other side of Denning's materialist narrative: if the cultural front rose with the age of the CIO, it also fell as that age had its back broken by the post-war red scare, and by the demographic and technological shifts which transformed American labor markets and workplaces. Just as the Popular Front in America failed to establish a European-style social democracy, so did the cultural front fail to leave more than traces of its laborist, working-class accents.

This elegiac tale of a landscape of ruins may seem at odds with his other, more optimistic claims that the cultural front transformed American culture. Yet such antinomies befit a moment of near counter-hegemony. And if Denning has claimed cultural figures whose own political affiliations and cultural practices initially seem tangential to the Popular Front (as some reviewers have contended; see, for example, Adam Shatz, "Bebop and Stalinist Kitsch" *The Nation* 10 March 1997: 25-8), the purpose would seem to be to demonstrate how the counter-hegemonic gravity of this new historic bloc was able to pull many otherwise "unaligned" figures into its orbit. Further, if Denning has decided against rehashing the bitter sectarian conflicts of the period (another frequent criticism), the intent is clearly not to paper over these (overly fetishized) conflicts, but instead to focus on the deeper "cultural continuities" which informed, nourished, and sustained this counter-hegemonic moment. Denning's project is thus not only to reconstruct this moment, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to offer it as part of a radical usable past, despite its "tragic failure" to constitute itself as such. This vivid, encyclopedic account succeeds in both aims.

Post-Script: Early on, Denning quotes Kenneth Burke's suggestion that, in considering a work, "we should see what participation in a Cause caused his work, by what Movement it was motivated, on what substance it made its stand" (56). These questions could be applied to Denning's own work here. He emphasizes how important the organization struggles within the culture industries were in radicalizing "the rank and file of the cultural front"—that though these unions reached nothing like the size or strength of their industrial counterparts, "they had a disproportionate effect on performers and artists, who came to feel directly connected to the union struggles of American working people" (90). And since it is not an irrelevant fact that Denning teaches at Yale, the flashpoint for many recent battles concerning the organization of labor in the academy, it may not be too presumptive to imagine that the Cause which caused his work might be the arrival, as Cary Nelson has put it, of late capitalism on campus, and the nascent attempts of university staff workers, grad students, and even some faculty to re-imagine a labor movement to counter this arrival. Denning's book reminds us that these labor struggles need to be conceived as part of a larger battle of American working people—in other words, part of what we may come to call a new Popular Front.

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