

Culture in the Age of Three Worlds. By Michael Denning. London: Verso, 2004. 280 pp. ISBN 1859845770.

This book is a collection of papers that builds on Denning's magisterial 1996 book *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, one of the most important works in cultural history of the past 10 years. In *The Cultural Front* Denning argued that oppositional cultural movements from the 1930s to the 1950s reshaped social life in America, providing essential support for social democracy and resistance to fascism at home and abroad. In addition, he demonstrates that the cultural front left a lasting mark on mass culture, modernism, and, because it was led by working people and the labour movement, constituted a genuine labouring of American culture. *The Cultural Front* ranges widely; starting from theories of cultural movements and cultural industries, it proceeds to consider major exemplars including Dos Passos, proletarian literature, Woodie Guthrie and migrant narratives, musical theatre, jazz, the blues, Orson Welles, and even the movement of radical cartoonists working for Disney. Through all of this, Denning resists the twin temptations of romanticizing the movement and seeing it as a hopeless footnote in the annals of twentieth-century capitalism.

Culture in the Age of Three Worlds moves the narrative forward from the 1950s to the present, taking up a similar set of issues but in a different way and on a different stage. The subject is still culture, oppositional social movements, and the American experience. However, much has changed since Welles shocked radio listeners with *The War of the Worlds* and Billie Holiday sang about a lynch mob in "Strange Fruit." Given globalization, Denning begins not with America but with the world, specifically with the Age of Three Worlds, which, from the end of World War II to the collapse of Soviet communism, provided the framework for understanding international political economy and culture.

The first part of the book examines the shift from national narratives to global and specifically "three worlds" narratives from the perspective of social and cultural movements, the academy, and the novel. With respect to new movements, Denning is particularly intrigued at the prospect for a global left combining new forms of cultural expression. These range from the magic realism of Third World writers beginning with Garcia Marquez (a founder of what Denning calls a "novelists international" of oppositional writers) to the new socialist realism of musicians dating from Bob Marley and on to the anti-globalization movement rooted in the first world, which, he says, using an expression from Nick Dyer-Witheford, is experiencing the first uprising of the knowledge proletariat.

Denning's focus on the academy is primarily aimed at the rise of cultural studies, which he sees as an important consequence of the antimonies of three worlds, including the neglect of culture by many of the analysts, such as dependency theorists, who chronicled the long history of three worlds but considered culture "mere perfume." For Denning, cultural studies was more than a new discipline; it provided a fundamental rethinking of the humanities established in an age of one world imperialism by advancing the inescapable connection between the cultural and the social (which the humanities would separate), by attacking "canonizations" of all sorts, and by rejecting the view that culture is only about the study of humankind.

In the book's second part, Denning returns to labour and specifically its relationship to culture and to cultural studies. Here he covers ground that should be familiar to readers of this journal, including the connections and disjunctions between the rise of cultural studies and the growth of the cultural industries as well as the ways cultural studies grew against the hegemonic view of culture as either an elite form of aesthetic expression uncontaminated by the masses or the anthropologist's term for social practices outside the circuits of capitalist contamination. What is particularly interesting about this part of the book is Denning's consideration of the road less taken by cultural studies. For him, Jameson (1981) and

Hall (1988) provided immensely useful groundwork, but he is dismayed that cultural studies chose to move more explicitly to the terrain staked out by Foucault (1995) in *Discipline and Punish* and only rarely detoured to the world opened up by Harry Braverman's (1998) now classic study of work, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. The difference between Foucault and Braverman is between an emphasis on totalistic control, surveillance, and the state on the one hand and a focus on resistance, the popular imagination, and social class on the other.

If a book of collected papers can have a heart, this is it. For Denning, the cultural turn leads to a dead end in Foucault but can return to its roots with a labouring of culture. This starts from a Marxian core, the generality of labour as a process of combining conception and execution—what separated the architect from the bee in Marx's description was the power to imagine a variety of structures before actually building one. Capitalism aims to separate the two, removing from workers (whether wage workers, household workers, students, or shoppers) the power to conceive. By concentrating that power in the minds of a few, with the object of removing the unruly imagination, it leaves only execution, the carrying out of preprogrammed tasks, turning the architect into the bee.

Whatever the site, a steel mill, a university, or a living room, this process is never completely successful, never total. The panopticon, as Bruno Latour (1999) has insisted, is more an oligopticon of multiple, partial, and conflicted surveillances. Starting from a broad definition of labour as purposive social activity, cultural studies has scope to examine the processes of cultural production, an area left to less critical theorists of "knowledge workers," as well as reception, to consider the cultural as a contested terrain, to imagine, following Jameson, unalienated labour as one of the utopian elements of cultural production, and to recognize, with his iconic heroine Tillie Olson, the "silenced people" whose genuine art is refused recognition and respect and is, therefore, lost without a cultural studies committed to labour.

The book's final chapters take up the United States, focusing the lens of a critical and "laboured" cultural studies on the field of American studies, Denning's formal disciplinary base. American studies has provided an academic alternative to Marxian analysis in the United States, sharing totalizing, critical, and transdisciplinary tendencies, though substituting the totality of the national, the critique through myth and symbol, and a transdisciplinary grounding in culture. Using his labourist perspective, Denning examines dominant themes in American studies—the impact of Puritanism, the literary romance, the frontier, and consumer culture. He also offers a powerful analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose influence on American intellectual history extends well beyond American studies. For Denning, de Tocqueville provided a European stamp of legitimacy for the American myths of pluralist democracy, equality, and civic participation, propelling forward a vision of American exceptionalism that continues today. Denning calls on critical scholars to pay more attention to the unexceptional nature of America's "settler capitalist" origins, its slave-holding past and racist present, and those democratic social movements deriving largely from its labour tradition. He concludes by returning to the theme of social movements, wondering if the current alliance between labour and student activists in the anti-globalization movement signals the rebirth of the cultural front.

This is an excellent collection brimming over with more ideas than a single volume can adequately handle. Even a title as broad as *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* cannot capture the diversity on display here. In that respect it understandably differs from *The Cultural Front* in more than the period covered. The latter produced a sustained treatment of a few central themes that flower brilliantly through a diverse but interconnected collection of case studies. This book covers a wider terrain but more thinly and with the unfortunate repetitions and meanderings that collections often display. Nevertheless, students of commu-

nication and cultural studies, and especially critical scholars, will find much to enjoy and to debate in this book.

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