
THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

The World In Our Image?

*A Survey of Papers from a Conference
on Popular Culture*

When Euro Disneyland opened near Paris this year, many French intellectuals were far from pleased. One writer, Jean Cau, sounding a little like Donald Duck at his angriest, called the theme park "a horror made of cardboard, plastic and appalling colors, a construction of hardened chewing gum and idiotic folklore taken straight out of comic books written for obese Americans." And novelist Jean-Marie Rouart grimly warned, "If we do not resist it, the kingdom of profit will create a world that will have all the appearance of civilization and all the savage reality of barbarism."

In the barbaric horror's homeland, meanwhile, intellectuals also have been pondering the immense worldwide impact of American popular culture. On March 10, a host of thinkers—few of them quite as overwrought as the French antagonists of Mickey Mouse—gathered at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. for a conference (with papers to be published as a book later this year) on "The New Global Popular Culture: Is It American? Is it Good for America? Is It Good for the World?" Conference organizer and AEI Senior Fellow Ben J. Wattenberg's answers to those questions were "Yes," "Yes," and "Yes," and he added, for good measure, that "what's happening in this realm is the most important thing now going on in the world." This last sentiment, both ardent fans and gloomy critics of American popular culture agreed, was not merely a reflection of the undying American penchant for superlatives.

"Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the multicolor chorus of Coca-Cola," Berkeley sociologist Todd Gitlin told the conference, "are... the icons of the latest in one-world ideology, or, better, a global semi-culture, helping to integrate at least the urban classes of most nations into a single cultural zone." In 1990, "Pretty Woman," a made-in-America Cinderella story about a prostitute, was the number one film in Germany, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Australia, and Denmark. The preceding year, four of the top five films in Argentina, Austria, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France,

Iceland, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden, and Yugoslavia originated in the United States.

This global popularity translates into big bucks for Hollywood film studios. Stephen E. Siwek, director of financial analysis at Economists Incorporated, in Washington, D.C., reported that the major studios earned \$1.7 billion in 1990 from theatrical film rentals in overseas markets, compared with just \$600 million five years earlier. Foreign videocassette and TV sales brought Hollywood another \$4.7 billion. (Despite the popularity of American fare, or perhaps because of it, the European Community, effective last October, imposed quotas requiring that a majority of entertainment programs broadcast on European television be European productions.)

The American producers of popular culture have been so successful in the global marketplace, George Mason University sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset maintained, because they supply "what people everywhere most want in popular culture." It is not that the world is becoming Americanized, he argued. "Rather, [it is that] we all like the same kinds of candy, ice cream, automobiles, computers, movies, detective stories, TV sitcoms, comics, music."

And, he might have added, magazines. *Reader's Digest* has 41 editions in 17 languages. With its "unabashed optimism, its emphasis on hu-

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man progress, its celebration of courage and adventure, and its strong sense of right and wrong," said the magazine's editor-in-chief, Kenneth V. Tomlinson, *Reader's Digest* can easily be regarded as a quintessentially American publication. Yet the bulk of its revenues and profits now comes from overseas. "This is not because the magazine 'exports' American culture," Tomlinson maintained, "but because it embodies values—about freedom, family, God, and the nature of man—that are universal and destined to become the dominant culture on our planet."

Not all popular culture, however, is quite so wholesome as *Reader's Digest*. "We have come a long way," AEI scholar Robert H. Bork observed, "from the era when it was considered shocking that 'Gone With the Wind' ended with Clark Gable saying to Vivien Leigh, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.'" Now, as Georgetown's Walter Berns noted, Madonna appears on stage, screen, and video before youthful audiences numbering in the millions and "is permitted to bare her breasts, rub her crotch, masturbate with bottles, and hop into bed with naked men while exclaiming about the size of their sexual organs." And she has become an international celebrity.

As have such cartoonish movie he-men as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. "The Rambo grunt, the Schwarzenegger groan, the 'Die Hard' machine-gun burst degrade the human spirit," Todd Gitlin insisted. "If the export of . . . the vicious, the blatant and stupid is 'good for the world,' to use the conference organizers' phrase, then all values have been sacrificed to the bottom—and I do mean bottom—line." Hollywood, he said, "is in the grip of inner forces which amount to a cynicism so deep as to defy parody. The movies are driven by economic and technological incentives to revel in the means to inflict pain, to maim, disfigure, shatter the human image."

Cynthia Grenier, a former production executive at Twentieth Century-Fox, took a different view. Just as in the past an actor such as John Wayne "symbolized American values—courage, independence of spirit, a kind of honor," she maintained, so today do movie heroes such as Schwarzenegger and Eastwood.

Whether one regards the violent heroics of these screen figures as admirable or contemptible or just mindlessly entertaining, there is little question that they—along with American popular culture in general—do reflect American values. At the core of those values, University of Connecticut political scientist Everett C.

Ladd observed, is "a uniquely insistent and far-reaching individualism—a view of the individual person which gives unprecedented weight to his or her choices, interests, and claims."

That extreme individualism has demonstrated worldwide appeal. "The more straitened or shut-off a culture," said Pico Iyer, a *Time* essayist, "the more urgent its hunger for all the qualities it associates with America: freedom and wealth and modernity. Thus poor countries around the world still hold themselves hostage to 'Bonanza,' and citizens of Communist countries long to make contact [with what they still imagine to be] the Promised Land of Opportunity."

Indeed, American popular culture, with its near-anarchic and hedonistic spirit, has had "a wonderfully corrosive effect on all totalitarian and strongly authoritarian regimes," noted Irving Kristol, co-editor of the *Public Interest*. But this same popular culture, he believes, can also be "self-destructive to a democracy." In a democracy, he argued, the people must constantly be "educated and disciplined to *civilized* self-government." Their "characters have to be *formed*," in order for such crucial habits of thought and action as self-control and deferred gratification "to prevail over more spontaneous impulses." And this is accomplished, in part, through "culture," which takes in "our religious institutions, our educational institutions, the media, and all of the various creative arts." These institutions used to have an "elitist" orientation, Kristol said. But today there is "no longer a 'high culture' to set the tone for the popular one. As a result, he contended, American popular culture, with all the destructive power of its extreme individualism, has become "less an ornament of American democracy than a threat to this democracy."

"We are exporting a principle of instability," Kristol asserted. Inevitably, foreign leaders, "after first welcoming the 'liberating' effects of our popular culture, soon show signs of what we call 'anti-Americanism.'" This has long been evident in Western Europe and now it can also be seen in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Russia.

"Popular culture provides entertainment, sometimes quite wonderful entertainment," Kristol acknowledged. "But while it may, at its worst, debase its consumers, it cannot ever elevate. That is not its mission. So," he concluded, "I am not happy that the United States today has been so successful in exporting its popular culture to the world at large. I am not happy that the United States even *has* this popular culture to export."