

## NO EXIT?

Review of Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

The problematic and shifting nature of selfhood and subjectivity came to dominate intellectual and cultural discussion in the postwar years. The "relation of the self to *culture* rather than to *society*," as Lionel Trilling described it, captured a shift among many intellectuals away from political and social analysis to an abiding concern with culture, alienation, and identity.<sup>1</sup> The decade of the 1950s was neatly framed by the publication of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), with its deep ambivalence about the change from an inner- to an other-directed character type, and by Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), where the theatricality of interpersonal relations became an object for analysis. Generally, intellectuals attempted to save the self from the ravages of a conformist consumer culture.

More recently, however, historians of the Cold War period have shied away from this defense of the self. They have wedded theories of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault to a narrative of corporate liberalism that manages to shut down the very possibility of an oppositional self, to foreclose authentic and meaningful forms of personal rebellion. According to this narrative, pro-corporate economic policies that promoted sustained economic growth, rising wages and consumption, and military build-up meshed with anticommunism at home and abroad. Abroad, anticommunism cloaked American expansionism; at home, it contained all forces deemed antagonistic to conformity. Thus corporate liberalism upheld an ideological consensus and assured institutional stability. This overly-worn thesis, begun by historians and especially popular of late with literary critics and art historians, posits that American life in the years following the Second World War was bound in a strait-jacket.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* (1949) represents, for some, the ur-text of corporate liberalism and the self in the postwar era.<sup>2</sup> In this work, Schlesinger's allegiance to the reformism of the New Deal remained steady; his politics of moderation rather than conservatism or progressivism informed the work. As a chastened liberal, drawing sustenance from Kierkegaard and Niebuhr, Schlesinger embraced an anguished self, which realized its freedom in part by struggling against Communist totalitarianism. For critics of the postwar corporate-liberal ideology, Schlesinger's work is mainly an impassioned call to arms to defend American power and prestige. Although Schlesinger celebrated the moral and political virtues of existentialist angst in general, the vision of the new self that came to predominate and to capture the era was that of Riesman's Other-Directed Individual and Whyte's Organization Man. These "individuals" were selves without substance, seeking approval from their peer group, lacking internal gyroscopes to resist or to rebel.

In many ways, Schlesinger's text has striking affinities with the Puritan jeremiad as interpreted by Sacvan Bercovitch. Borrowing from Gramsci's theory of hegemony, although often anticipating Foucault's language of discourse, Bercovitch argued that the jeremiad captured the American mythos: this rhetorical ritual decried lost virtue but blunted the possibility of serious change by accepting—without analyzing or comprehending—a vision of America as redeemer nation. The ritual, as interpreted by Bercovitch, coheres with a capitalist ideology of middle-class individualism and all too easily evades the reality of American imperialism and racism.<sup>3</sup>

Although Bercovitch never trained his interpretive guns on Schlesinger's text, he could easily fit it into his theory of the jeremiad. For *The Vital Center* invokes an American mission, with warnings against a fall associated with simplistic optimism. Of course, Schlesinger's anxious liberalism, along with its hearty call for individualism and national unity against Communism, was not intended to be a conservative document. Indeed, Schlesinger asked Americans to "renew the traditional sources of American radicalism and seek out ways to maintain our belief at a high pitch of vibrations."<sup>4</sup> But such vibrations cannot pierce ears deaf to reformism and alert only to absolute rejection of corporate liberalism. Just as Bercovitch manages to dismiss the rhetorical dissent of mid-nineteenth-century American reformers, so might his words be applied to Schlesinger's ideal: it was destined to fail "because it was grounded in prescribed ritual forms [that] circumscribed the threat of basic social alternatives. It facilitated process in such a way as to enlist radicalism itself in the cause of institutional stability."<sup>5</sup>

Here, in a nutshell, is the intellectual and political cul-de-sac in which historians of the postwar years have become trapped. Radicalism, rhetorical and otherwise, experimentalism in the arts such as abstract expressionism or Beat prosody, are found wanting, guilty of the crime of not overthrowing the consensus of corporate liberalism. That which does not end in rebellion is condemned for complicity, a false radicalism which itself becomes another "cause of institutional stability."

Now historians may disagree with one another about whether corporate liberalism was a Leviathan and even whether it was good or bad, but certainly they should try to comprehend the possibilities of freedom as well as containment in the postwar ethos. Interpretations of corporate-liberal hegemony too often reduce culture to politics, leave little room for aesthetic enjoyment, presume that corporate liberalism coopts everything, and promote an ideal of radicalism so ill-defined as to become almost meaningless. The title of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* sums up the logic of the corporate-liberal hegemony thesis. For Bercovitch and others, there is no exit from the hegemony of corporate liberalism. While the prison that Sartre dramatized was defined by individuals' failure to take responsibility for choices, or by individuals who construct themselves inauthentically, the no-exit of these recent America critics forecloses the Sartrean emphasis on choice and leaves us with at best mildewed attempts to push against the edges of ideological consensus or futile dashes to escape cooptation.

It is with great anticipation, then, that we greet two new works promising to bring forth greater complexity of interpretation and to open up space for meaningful individual rebellion and political protest against the dark power of corporate-liberal consensus. While Daniel Belgrad valiantly tries to demonstrate how a "culture of spontaneity" resisted the cultural power of corporate liberalism, Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* ends up, perhaps unintentionally, as one of the strongest statements to date of corporate-liberal hegemony. By demonstrating how a culture of cool fit the needs of both advertising and youth rebellion, Frank, like Bercovitch in his study of the jeremiad, manages to reduce the complex radicalism of the counterculture to a listless form of individual expression. Tying that radicalism to the ideological power of modern advertising, Frank presents yet another work that leaves the individual self trapped in the false freedom of consumer culture.

Belgrad begins by acknowledging the power of corporate-liberal culture in the postwar years. In a sometimes all-encompassing dichotomy, Belgrad contends that corporate-liberal culture was premised upon science, rationality, empiricism, modernity, objectivity, and a mind-body dualism. In contrast, the culture of spontaneity celebrated emotion, chance, nontraditional forms of knowledge, unmediated thought, improvisation, and mind-body holism. For Belgrad, furthermore, the "culture of spontaneity" was capable of resisting cooption and appropriation by the behemoth of corporate liberalism.

Belgrad's work is most valuable in proving that a unified, vibrant "culture of spontaneity"—derived from the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Carl Jung, Zen Buddhism, and other modes of thought distant from the received "Western tra-

dition"—thrived in the postwar years across a variety of artistic mediums. Belgrad divines fascinating affinities in style, emotion, and intellectual origins between such art forms as gesture-field painting (Jackson Pollock), poetry (Charles Olson), music (the bebop improvisations of Lester Young and the experimentalism of John Cage), dance (Merce Cunningham), psychology (the gestalt theory of Paul Goodman), and Beat literature (Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg). The range of reference in this book and the connections posited between diverse art forms are splendid, allowing Belgrad to promote spontaneity as a significant part of the intellectual life of the postwar years—a major alternative (and antagonist) to the New York Intellectuals and New Critics, who advanced principles of aesthetic formalism and a poetics of irony and distance.

In addition to the range of references, readers will find in Belgrad's work sustained attention to thinkers often ignored in the intellectual and cultural history of postwar America. For example, Belgrad brings Paul Goodman into full view as a therapist in revolt against the conformity of the period and the weak solutions proffered by such neo-Freudian analysts as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney. For Goodman, authoritarianism was not associated with the Communist state alone but also with the corporate-liberal state in America, whose conception of "normality" Goodman found to be pathological. Goodman's solution, "Gestalt Therapy," required, as its name implies, understanding not simply the existential angst of the individual in the universe but also the interaction between social institutions and individuals and interpersonal relations in general. Goodman believed that developing spontaneous awareness and freeing up reserves of energy could bring on a transformation: "Force is welling in the soul. And if we use our strength in love, there is still more strength for beautiful collaboration, and even for idiosyncratic strokes—and always we are ready to the present" (152). Such an emphasis on the present, on the body, on breaking the bonds of normalcy, and on personal interactions would constitute the essence of the culture of spontaneity as an enduring challenge to the mind-body dualism and scientific reason that presumably defined corporate liberalism.

As with any work of sweeping dimensions, problems certainly appear. All too often Belgrad posits overly firm lines of division between spontaneous artists and, for want of a better term, traditional "intellectual" artists. Thus in the section on painting, Belgrad ignores the work of color-field painters such as Mark Rothko, which does not fit well into either group. And Belgrad seeks to cordon off the work of Jackson Pollock from that of Willem de Kooning. The latter is found to be too much of an existentialist, thus suffering from mind-body dualism. In contrast, Pollock is the exemplar of spontaneity, subjectivity, and holism, "engaging the unconscious mind through its locus in the human body" (110). But as is evident in the recent New York Museum of Modern Art retrospective on Pollock, the artist surely engaged the conscious mind, confronting himself through the canvas, carefully refining and reworking lines after the initial explosion of energy. Belgrad's interpretation of de Kooning's "Woman" paintings as existentialist reduces their meaning to a disgust with the body, in almost the same terms that Sartre used in *Nausea*. One can also interpret these paintings, though, as a critique of the dominant consumer culture, parodying the mass-produced images of the alluring woman. In his discussion of existentialism and art, Belgrad goes against his own often-expressed (and correct) recognition that artists quite properly are eclectic in their cultural appropriation; what they appropriate is defined less by its logical connections than by its value in the production of a particular work of art.

To a degree, Belgrad successfully fends off charges that the work of spontaneous artists contributed to the corporate-liberal hegemony of their day; indeed, this is one intent of his book. He accomplishes this, in part, by positing a deep chasm between the component parts of the corporate-liberal ideal (rationality, dualism) and the culture of spontaneity (freedom, body). Belgrad rightly resists attempts to reduce works of art to their reception rather than their creation. To do so fails to appreciate the internal logic (or emotions) or tradition within which a work either functions or rebels. But for this

interpretive ploy to succeed, one first has to accept Belgrad's definitions and oppositions. And even if one does, the cooption thesis may still be invoked. Charles Olson's ideal of "voluminous production" and immediate perception in his poetry may be contrary to the logic of corporate-liberal rationality, but in a sense this aesthetic of production jibes all too well with the mass consumption and surface-level ideals of corporate liberalism (31, 123). Cooption is unnecessary since the form of expression already presumes the form of reality it seeks to transcend.

The essential thesis Belgrad seeks to drive home, apart from demonstrating wonderfully the expansive and central nature of the culture of spontaneity, is how that culture's "principles of body-mind holism and intersubjectivity" challenged the Cold War culture (244). In his zeal to celebrate spontaneity, Belgrad sometimes reduces other artistic modes to complicity with corporate liberalism. He fails to demonstrate why a cultural politics premised upon reason, in the work of someone like Noam Chomsky, cannot effectively challenge the presumptions to reason and objectivity that inform corporate liberalism. Perhaps it is too much to expect that any constellation of ideas can mount a successful offensive against such a chameleon-like and powerful opponent as the culture of corporate liberalism. But Belgrad deserves praise for his earnest attempt to push the edges of rebellion, to respect and restore an artistic tradition of spontaneity that opposed the conformity associated with the corporate status quo.

Alas, Thomas Frank would pooh pooh the notion that a culture of spontaneity in any way challenged the hegemony of corporate liberalism. For Frank, spontaneity, creativity, and improvisation became the trademarks that defined advertising, the battering ram of corporate-liberal ideology in the 1960s. As Frank would have it, the cultural radicals of "spontaneity" and the radicals of advertising were all drinking from the same well of creative freedom and personal liberation. That water only sustained, in Frank's view, the power of corporate America and thus defined the limits of the counterculture of the 1960s.

Frank firmly rejects interpretations that see the creative revolution in 1960s advertising as a case of business coopting youth rebellion. He subverts this perception by citing two facts. First, the embrace of "hip attitudes" by the advertising industry grew out of frustrations and problems internal to the industry. Second, this internal rebellion was begun by 1960, before a youth movement existed that might be coopted. On the first point Frank's argument is compelling. The cultural critique of conformity in the 1950s often focused on the world of advertising, on its lack of creativity, and on the dull solemnity of the men in the gray flannel suits. Within the worlds of advertising and menswear—the focus of Frank's research—a creative revolution ensued around 1960, one that jettisoned the previous mode of advertising, based upon empirical research and predictable layouts, in favor of the hip style, which emphasized creativity and youthfulness. Moreover, the very critique of the advertising world became part of advertising copy, a form of counter-advertising that defined the famous Volkswagen campaign of the early 1960s undertaken by the Doyle Dane Bernbach agency. The Volkswagen was touted for the very product qualities that advertising agencies had previously rejected: its rather pedestrian but practical qualities. And, in time, the Volkswagen campaign became joined to the youth movement, as that automobile emerged as the vehicle of choice for a generation of consumers that did not want to appear to be conformist consumers.

Here we begin to see problems with Frank's often glib analysis, with his connection of rebellion to consumption. Consider more fully the case of the Volkswagen. First, Frank reduces the 1960s to its symbols without understanding the reality, never fully controlled by advertising gurus, that lay behind those symbols. The Volkswagen became the car of choice for many young people because it had real assets: it got better mileage than any other car on the market at the time, it was easy to repair, relatively inexpensive, and its size fit well with the counterculture ideology of "small is beautiful."

Thus Frank, in his enthusiasm to merge the counterculture with the presumptions of advertising, elides the reasoning process of the consumers, thus leaving out at least half of the equation.

Frank's book drips with wonderfully understated comic irony and earnestness. He begins by taking seriously the internal history of advertising and the heady enthusiasm of advertisers for the style and substance of cool, hip, and youth. By the early 1960s, according to Frank, chaotic management, absolute creative freedom, and an attitude of rebellion characterized leading advertising agencies. At times, in his lively prose, Frank seems to suggest that this revolution was valued in and of itself, quite apart from any particular success in selling products. Sincerity rather than cooptation defined the introduction of hip into the world of advertising. "American advertising took the side it did during the cultural revolution of the 1960s not simply because it wanted to sell a particular demographic, but because it found great promise in the new values of the counterculture" (123). Youth culture, in this equation, was a perfect vehicle for the advertising executive to gain greater freedom and a boon for a new generation to think itself free of the conformity of consumption, while busily consuming goods packaged in the language of hip.

Thus we have, as presented in the corporate boardrooms of the menswear industry and the advertising agencies, a variant of Belgrad's culture of spontaneity: experimentation, chaos, and a rejection of empiricism and scientific rationality. Yet all these tokens of cultural critique, Frank discovers, could well support and in fact come to define advertising, one of the engines powering corporate liberalism. A revolution did occur in the 1960s, and it was a sort of permanent revolution, albeit not in the sense popularized by Mao. Instead, with advertising in the forefront, the 1960s created a world where the numbness of conformity and emptiness of modern existence were faced head-on. If the 1950s critique of conformity defined the plastic, boring designs of mass-produced products as an enemy, admen of the 1960s sold products that came to exemplify freedom. The consumption of rebellion—in the choice of one's automobile, records, wall posters, and hip clothing—came to be confused, came to be coordinate, with the very act of rebellion.

In recent years some cultural theorists have attempted to celebrate the phenomenon of consumption as rebellion. Here the act of immediate gratification, of window shopping, of dreaming of freedom through the purchase of products, is transformed into a behind-the-scenes critique of an aesthetic of limits, a rejection of the Protestant ideal of denial. In the intriguing work of French theorist Gilles Lipovetsky, fashion, the "reign of the ephemeral," becomes a means of democratic possibility and an inherent critique of all systems of domination based upon denial and limitation of choices. The motor of history, in this view, is the power of the individual to navigate and create identity and self through fashion.<sup>6</sup> In essence, to accessorize is to be free.

Frank does not fall for this siren song of fashion. While he is well attuned to the advertisers' heartfelt turn to hip, he turns a deaf ear to its seductive promise of genuine freedom. On the other hand, however, his critique of false freedom makes a caricature of the counterculture. The generation of the 1960s, while prone to misinterpretation, excess, and consumerism, was also capable of concerted political activity, evolving commitments against racism, sexism, and imperialism. Rather than simply opening up the world to sybaritic excess, as some conservatives have it, radicals of the 1960s actually helped create a culture that meaningfully challenged (even if it could not overthrow) many presumptions of corporate liberalism.

Both of these works can yield a pessimistic reading. Belgrad's culture of spontaneity appears to have made few dents in the armor of corporate liberalism. Moreover, as Frank indicates, the culture of spontaneity, growing out of the critique of postwar conformity and scientific rationalism, became the very language for advertising and, in turn, for the health of the state. While paragons of the Left and the Right may coalesce in their condemnations of the excesses of the 1960s,

the corporate-liberal state and advertising's lively investment in a hip style associated with that period of rebellion is predominant at this time and shows no signs of weakening.

Nonetheless, there is an appealing enthusiasm in Frank's writing that suggests we are not totally bereft of possibilities. His vibrant diatribes against corporate culture are valuable.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, lifestyle changes are not the ground upon which to do battle with corporate culture. But where and how is the battle to be joined, especially if we reject the thesis that corporate hegemony is everywhere, even in the sinews of protest? If it is everywhere, then resistance is impossible if not absurd. We are in a world without exit.

One mode of resistance against corporate hegemony and advertising enticements is a rigorous intellectual life. Such a life, by definition, chafes against consumerism and fashionable discourse. The rigor and complexity of the post-war New York intellectuals, for instance, was impressive and valuable—even though they became absurd when an intellectual hardening of the arteries kept them from recognizing the best in the culture of spontaneity and popular culture. A rigorous critical disposition, towards both the culture at large and one's own ideas, holds itself up as a form of resistance in an age of information and advertising, where everything seems cheap and ubiquitous, predigested and phony. Modern Jeremiahs of the mind may not lead us out of the desert that Frank surveys, but they may point us resolutely toward exits leading to a better place.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Trilling, "Preface," *The Opposing Self* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Typical of works stressing the centrality of Schlesinger's text and the power of corporate-liberal consensus are Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 245-47; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 189-94; Stanley Aronowitz, *Roll Over Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). For a strong criticism of Bercovitch, his reading of Perry Miller, and his problematic relation to texts, see David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 32-52.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1988), 188.

<sup>5</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See a further selection of Frank's writing in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, eds. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).

George Cotkin  
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo