

## **Review Essay**

# **The Politics of Culture**

**William Graebner**

**TIME PASSAGES: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture.** By George Lipsitz. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

The world of the 1980s and 1990s is a world of disequilibrium. On the one hand, politics is an alien universe, a field of insurmountable problems—the deficit, global pollution, an enormous underclass in the decaying inner cities—that no one cares to even try to solve, populated by Reagan and Bush and incumbents that can't be defeated, even when they do harmful things or nothing at all. Culture, on the other hand, is by comparison remarkably fluid and open, a free marketplace of words, music and pictures, at once reflecting and celebrating the nation's increasingly diverse population. Politics is modern. Culture is postmodern.

George Lipsitz' superb study of post-World War II popular culture, *Time Passages*, exists at the site of this disequilibrium. In a series of provocative and finely crafted essays on film, rock 'n' roll, early television, popular novels, New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations, and other aspects of popular culture, Lipsitz argues that popular culture has been, and remains, an arena of hope, possibility, criticism, and even resistance for millions of ordinary people—wounded and anxious people, disconnected from the past and from others like themselves—who otherwise have felt trapped and powerless in the economic and political realities of postwar America. Given the choice between modern politics and postmodern culture, Lipsitz—and postwar Americans—have opted for culture.

To be sure, Lipsitz recognizes that culture is hardly the free space described above. Indeed, every suggestion of the alternative and oppositional possibilities of popular culture is preceded by a litany of dire warnings, each delivered with a tone of hard-boiled realism: New technologies such as television “lend themselves to new forms of exploitation and oppression,” “trivialize and distort culture” and “turn art into commodities” (vii, 5); “cultural products generally reflect the dominant ideology of any given period” (13); “dominant ideology triumphed on television in the 1950s, just as it did in political and social life” (67); commercial mass culture “covers the globe” (233); communications takes place against a background of “concentrated economic and political power unprecedented in world history” (271). Yet popular culture survives this gauntlet and remains sufficiently free and independent to serve as the matrix through which Americans have attempted to understand, salvage and improve their lives. Hence *I Remember Mama* and other family-centered programs on mid-century network television “expos[ed] the contradictions of the nuclear family” (57); the music of barrio artist Richie Valens drew on traditional Mexican melodies, African-American blues and rhythm & blues, and white rockabilly in a synthesis that represented the desires of many Los Angeles youth for a multicultural, inter-racial community; *Detour* and other films of *film noir* director Edgar G. Ulmer broke with “dominant narratives” to depict a universe governed by fate and contingency; and tribes of “Indians” (working-class black men, actually) parade the back streets of New Orleans at Mardi Gras, drawing on African music, the verbal heritage of the “dozens,” and other traditions to transcend their work lives and become a “community of resistance and self-affirmation” (238).

“I chose to write about the powerless,” Lipsitz announces in the Preface, “rather than the powerful” (xi). Of the examples just listed, several—the Mardi Gras Indians, the Los Angeles youths that were the audience for Valens’s records—were undeniably powerless. The other examples, however, only *imply* the existence of the powerless: i.e., the television and film audiences that watched *Mama* and saw Ulmer’s films. Elsewhere, Lipsitz finesses the problem of how works of popular culture are received (by the powerless). He suggests, for example, that “maximally competent listeners” could “discover meaningful historical connections” in the work of David Bowie and Chuck D (104). But this only begs the question: are all the powerless “maximally competent listeners”? Surely not, and if not, what is it that ordinary, minimally competent listeners hear and absorb? Because he doesn’t know—and probably can’t know—Lipsitz can only speculate on what the powerless might derive, or might have derived in 1950, from a given popular cultural context. There is nothing wrong with this process; given the problems with applying reception theory to forty-year-old evanescent artifacts, it is surely the best one can do. But it is not equivalent to writing about the powerless.

Lipsitz is an optimist. While he recognizes the sordid side of the American past (and the limitations of the present), he explains that he is “unwilling to let the history of monopoly, imperialism, racism, and sexism stand for the totality of

American experience," preferring to offer up the "earnest longings and heroic struggles for something different that have characterized the American past" (xvi). Lipsitz offers this agenda in explicitly political terms; the ebullient optimism of *Time Passages* is intended to have therapeutic consequences: to empower the powerless. To do otherwise—to find only the "debased and distorted," is to have a "pessimism that masquerades as critique," indeed to collaborate "with the oppressors" (xvi). Since the products of my own hand have often been rather bleak in outlook, I can hardly deny to Lipsitz his preference for the positive. But is it necessary, or productive, to characterize those who prefer the dark side—or simply prefer to examine power rather than resistance to it—as masquerading collaborationists? Must we all practice the power of positive history?

If optimism is part of Lipsitz's political strategy, it also characterizes his approach to popular culture texts and, more importantly, his analysis of the way in which those texts intersect with a larger "politics." For Lipsitz, culture is the reservoir of oppositional thought. Why? Partly because oppositional thought can survive "in the subtle nuances of cultural moments too small for co-optation or censorship" (132)—a 45 r.p.m. record on an independent label, a band's performance at a neighborhood street dance, the songs of the Mardi Gras Indians, the films of a director operating outside the major studios. And partly because, since culture is made by people who oppose the dominant culture, or presented to people who oppose it, "all cultural expressions speak to both residual memories of the past and emergent hopes for the future" (13). Thus the African-American elements in rock 'n' roll compensate white, working-class musicians for "what they missed in life," and even the much vilified Amos 'n' Andy television dramas of the late 1940s and early 1950s "contained the potential for undermining the commodified social relations of the present" (113, 70).

Behind Lipsitz's confident assertion that "all cultural expressions" contain oppositional elements is the belief that culture is part of a larger system that must *inevitably* present some version of the "sedimented class tensions" (62) that lie just below the surface of American life. Using language reminiscent of John Kenneth Galbraith's description of "countervailing power" (a classic of liberal optimism), Lipsitz argues that even the most monolithic and centralized forms of cultural power—network television in the 1950s, Hollywood in the 1940s—in their efforts to achieve consensus and closure, offered up for public consumption some version of the "other." Hence the film *Sergeant York* could achieve a pro-war, interventionist consensus only by first articulating a pacifist perspective. And the television networks, driven by the desire to reach the largest possible audience, "encouraged exploitation of real fears and problems confronting viewers" (56). "The dominant culture," writes Lipsitz in paraphrasing Frederic Jameson, "can only presume to ease anxieties like disconnection from the past by calling attention to them in the first place, thereby running the risk of re-opening the very ruptures it seeks to close" (17).

Although Lipsitz presents this culture-as-politics perspective with bravado, the rhetoric of *Time Passages* reveals a curious lack of confidence in the efficacy of culture. When Lipsitz argues, for example, that rock 'n' roll contains "an unfinished dialogue about the potential of oppositional traditions" (109), the word *potential*—a word used throughout this book—limits the claim considerably. Referring to *Mama*, Lipsitz uses the same hedged language, noting that "at least the *possibility* [italics mine] of oppositional readings remains alive" (94). A brilliant exegesis of the fusions within the Los Angeles music scene is similarly replete with qualifiers: the city's Mexican-American musicians make "efforts," and they "struggle" to put together a block "capable" of challenging the dominant culture, but they never have real, demonstrable power (152). In some chapters this rhetoric of doubt reaches the level of conscious argument. Lipsitz wonders whether the counter-narrative of the Mardi Gras Indians "actually threatens the hegemony of the dominant culture" (248), and, having surveyed the films of Edgar Ulmer, he despairingly suggests that "in the end, it may all be futile" (207).

Further than this Lipsitz will not go. He will not take up directly the central problem of the relationship between popular culture and power. Nonetheless, to assemble a few of Lipsitz' examples is to learn how limited the power is that derives from culture. The characters in Samuel Fuller's films have "a certain moral power, a certain dignity" (190). Denied creative work lives, the working class finds "harmony with others" in rock 'n' roll music (113). And the Mardi Gras Indians discover their oppositional culture reaching the mainstream in popular songs such as Shirley and Lee's "Let the Good Times Roll" (1956) and Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (1985).

If, as Lipsitz claims, "culture exists as a form of politics" (16), it is a tepid politics—a politics of survival, rather than transformation. There is solid evidence here that the American people—some of them, anyway—continue to struggle against atomization, the alienated workplace, the commodification of just about everything, and other qualities of late-twentieth century life under capitalism, and, furthermore, that this struggle occurs within the frame of popular culture. What is missing is evidence that the struggle has produced—or can produce—any significant revision of the social order. Against the cultural evidence marshalled in *Time Passages*, one might offer the voting record of millions of working-class Americans who helped elect Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. While one can appreciate the multicultural dream represented in LA's fusion music, the riots following the Rodney King verdict—riots that reflected the inter-racial and inter-ethnic tensions in the city—shed doubt on the ability of popular culture to achieve any sort of genuine reconciliation in a society rent by poverty and racism.

A healthy politics should offer more than therapy, more than potential benefits, more than memories of some moment in the past when times were good—more even, than dignity. It is the great tragedy of American life—and hardly grounds for optimism—that the politics of culture is the only game in town.