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Review Article

Mutual Incomprehension: Class in America

The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class. By Benjamin DeMott. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1990. Pp. 264. \$18.95.

The Culture of Contentment. By John Kenneth Galbraith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. Pp. ix, 195. \$22.95.

These two books, I believe, are evidence of a significant development in the tenor of American cultural criticism—a change both disquieting and long overdue. This development is itself part of a striking trend that has become apparent since the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the platform that has sustained American policy for the past 40—or 75—years. Neither book, to be sure, is much concerned with the Soviet Union as such; or with the choreography of the protracted ballet by which the two old adversaries have justified each other's behavior. But as we struggle to awake from one of history's more grotesque nightmares, we have good reason to view our own culture with queasy consternation.

Neither of these books is muckraking or anti-American in tone; which makes them even more disturbing. American social criticism has a long tradition of angry self-castigation in the interests of reform. The analysis in these two books, however, deals with cultural defects so serious as to suggest that significant reform of the American social and economic system may not be politically possible. Galbraith, indeed, says as much;

albeit in so indulgent and avuncular a tone as to suggest that he doesn't really mean it.

The Imperial Middle and *The Culture of Contentment* complement and reinforce each other; though the reader gradually becomes aware that their authors have quite different values. DeMott is concerned about how the refusal to acknowledge the role of social class in American society serves to blind its members to the constraints and manipulation to which they are subjected. Galbraith, from the vantage point of an economist, establishment intellectual and former U.S. Ambassador to India, takes much of this for granted with an Ontario-bred smugness. Conscientiously avoiding moral judgment, he accepts the fact of social class discrimination, but deplors the demographic changes that have left the poor disfranchised and the balance of American electoral power inextricably in the hands of DeMott's imperious middle: too comfortable and too fearful even to consider the policies required if the society that provides their accustomed advantages is to be preserved.

The Imperial Middle is the older of the two works: Galbraith cites it briefly. It is richer and more complex: beautifully though very intricately styled. DeMott observes the manifestations of class through all of America's modes of communication, formal and informal, especially notable in schooling and stereotyping in the media. One of the few astonishing lapses in his perception results, indeed, from hypersensitivity to stereotyping. He repeatedly criticizes *All in the Family* and *The Simpsons* for caricaturing working-class families and making them the butt of ridicule; thus missing an important point. The Simpsons, by definition, are caricatures; and both they and the Bunkers do indeed bear the hallmarks of the middle-class imagination. But they aren't put down: Archie and Homer are triumphant. They prevail because of their flaws, not in spite of them; while, Edith, Marge and little Lisa are essential repositories of good sense and decency. As to Bart Simpson—well, if you follow his exploits attentively, you wouldn't need DeMott to explain why American schools are really weird. That's why they try to bar pupils from wearing Bart Simpson T-shirts, and fail.

But this hardly detracts from the elegance with which DeMott dissects the complex, concealed interlocking devices by which social class determines access to life in America. A presidential election provides the ultimate example of what DeMott calls "the omni syndrome" in action.

The omni syndrome is familiar as the American way of minimizing the significance of individual power or competence, the ingratiating of the celebrity assuring the potentially envious that anybody can do anything and their 15 minutes of fame is coming up right after these messages.

DeMott mentions Andy Warhol but again obscures his point a bit by concentrating on George Plimpton as his example. Plimpton is an amateur, even a dilettante—not a celebrity. He certainly doesn't conceal the fact that his class and his connections are what opens doors for him; but once inside he relies on at least a minimum of skill and a lot of empathy to get the feel of what he is doing and the acceptance of his admittedly provisional colleagues. The incident (89) in which DeMott cites as evidence of inauthenticity Plimpton's "bewilderment" at being expected to concentrate totally on the Detroit Lions' football game while sitting, as usual, on the substitutes' bench seems to me just wrong. Plimpton is shocked at his own lapse: that's why he tells the story on himself. It is a little troubling that DeMott draws on this incident to illustrate one of his most important conclusions:

Intention is immaterial; playacted intimacy often deceives. Exploiting vast electronic resources, the would-be 'man of the people'—the political omni fond both of strategic gestures of access and of the language of kindness—persuades millions of his earnest concern for the people's needs; the realization that these are mere gestures—that, like Plimpton, the man of the people is only putatively on the bench of gritty life—weakens an already frail trust in governance.

This is precise, though not precisely aimed; a paper Lion makes a poorer target than a plastic Quayle. But like many astute perceptions, it raises more questions than it answers. How would this issue be applied to Governor Clinton, who seems to be so purely a political technician that the question of authenticity hardly arises? No ideologue, Clinton doesn't test positive for *anything*; his inauthenticity is his most authentic feature. Would he make a good President? Quite possibly a competent one: and goodness, as the voters in their frail trust in governance have come to understand, has nothing to do with it.

DeMott's failure to perceive that people may be passionately committed to inauthenticity, willing to die for it without even noticing that they have, does limit the depth of his understanding of American

social dynamics. But he makes up for it by his account of the subtle effectiveness of social class in crucially blocking communication in situations you might not expect it to affect. He recounts the drowning of a black student at Amherst several years ago, during a swimming test required of all entering freshmen precisely to prevent such tragedies. This wasn't hazing; it simply never occurred to anybody that an Amherst freshman might not know how to swim at all and would be ashamed to admit it. DeMott shows how class-based mutual incomprehension also led to tragic misunderstandings in the Whitehead-Stern surrogate-mother case and, by Norman Mailer's account, to the failure of sympathetic attempts to save the young Gary Gilmore from himself.

One of DeMott's greatest strengths is his willingness to draw on his own poignant experiences for examples of the pervasive influence of social class. Early on, he tells of the excruciatingly polite rebuff his daughter suffered in childhood when she attempted to join an Episcopal church choir in Amherst; then, some 25 years later, of the effective suppression of an excessively honest documentary film on student life in a Muncie, Indiana high-school this same daughter had completed under sponsorship of the Xerox Corporation and the Public Broadcasting System. The feature-length film, *Seventeen* had been designed as part of a series commemorating Robert and Helen Merrill Lynd's classic studies of *Middletown* (Muncie) and *Middletown in Transition*; but was cut from the series though it won several international awards at subsequent independent screenings. As one of the students of adolescent socialization who viewed the film at the request of its co-producer Jeff Kreines and sought, unsuccessfully, to prevent its excision, I can vouch for its quality as well as for the accuracy of DeMott's account of the episode in the concluding acknowledgements section of *The Imperial Middle*.

In his Introduction, DeMott states that: "The task of this book is to do as much as can be done, in the space of a single work, to clarify the nature of the pressures preventing the society from comprehending its own character and structure" (12). He succeeds brilliantly. He does not, however, undertake to explain precisely why these pressures prevail so successfully and what the social and, especially the economic consequences are and may be.

Galbraith, in *The Culture of Contentment* does, clearly and concisely, with occasional, roguish *mea culpa* flourishes suited to so influential an

economist and public figure. Basically, his explanation is simple and damning. High-tech, industrially developed nations depend on a largely disfranchised underclass to do their dirty, dead-end, miserably paid jobs: migrant workers, discriminated ethnic minorities, *Gastarbeiters*. Such people are at a peculiar disadvantage in a democracy. They are assumed to share in universal rights and responsibilities but are excluded from the political processes by which these might be secured and defended. In the United States, even indisputably native-born poor are excluded by intricate and demanding voter-registration requirements; a bill recently introduced in Congress that would have permitted people to register when they apply for a driver's license and even at shelters for the homeless was bitterly opposed and defeated.

Since everyone is expected to honor the "work-ethic," no moral distinction is recognized between the doubtless more interesting and certainly better rewarded work done by professionals and entrepreneurs and the insecure drudgery that, in any case, is increasingly being replaced by technology, the "underclass" is stigmatized for its lack of motivation, reluctance to work and criminality. The squalor, social conflict and potential chaos, and progressive economic failure this condition threatens to bring are evident enough that a political response to avert them might reasonably be expected. It is easy enough to see what might be done by higher and more equitable taxation, reduced military expenditure and entitlements and, especially, productive investment instead of extravagant, destructive speculation.

The heart of Galbraith's work is his detailed and critical explanation of why no such program is politically feasible. Essentially, his premise is that the fruits of industrial democracy have been distributed just cleverly enough to defuse, diffuse and intimidate effective protest; but almost certainly too little to forestall economic disaster for the next generation. And he puts the major factors in proper perspective with proper irony: the fact that wasteful and incompetent bureaucrats are stigmatized as such only if they work for the—especially the U.S.—government; the fact that pressing reform appears to be in nobody's short-term interest. *Après nous, le deluge aigre!*

Well as these books complement each other there is still something crucial missing, though DeMott almost supplies it. In the introduction to *The Imperial Middle*, he notes:

After all, the social untruth . . . isn't at every level dysfunctional: it pleases a significant sector of the population, supports a go-ahead, optimistic mentality, and most important, swells currents of irreverence that undeniably freshen the culture as a whole. (11)

This from one of Bart Simpson's denigrators! But the status quo does indeed please and richly reward a significant—I would say a decisive—sector of the population: this, as Galbraith emphasizes, is what keeps it going. And neither author recognizes, if indeed he would agree, that effective political action requires something far more drastic than they suggest: a fundamental ideological revision that would alter our perception of modern and postmodern industrial society, capitalist or whatever, itself: the kind of analysis Noam Chomsky, whom neither author mentions, has been offering for decades.

One cannot listen to the political rhetoric poured upon us during the present electoral campaigns—for, of course, one has begun in Canada, too—without reaching the appalling conclusion that the crises that so alarm DeMott and Galbraith and that should alarm us at least as much simply cannot be discussed within current ideological limits. I don't mean that politicians wouldn't dare, though they wouldn't. They couldn't if they would. The prevailing assumptions forestall any such discussion. The most important function of education is to train our young people to be more competitive. The United States stands tall as the liberator and benefactor of Eastern Europe and everywhere else, at great sacrifice to itself. The United Nations is the autonomous guardian of peace and democracy. The public interest is vitally dependent on Middle Eastern oil for jobs, jobs, jobs. Or is it drugs, drugs, drugs on the free, free, free market?

It is possible to get rich on such nonsense; many people have and are still doing it; and no effective contradiction will be brooked. It is also possible, it seems, to use it as the basis for a new world order. Watch out, for God's sake; here it comes again!