



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America. by Neil Jumonville
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edged at various points in the book. But since his study is set up as an examination of "the cultural context of a postwar generation of young readers," the fact that this generation included other than white males ought to have been taken into account in selecting "representative" themes and venues. (According to Benton, 48 percent of the comic book audience in 1950 was female.) Finally, though Savage does state from the outset that he is concerned with "content rather than style," this seems a somewhat naïve and ultimately self-defeating limitation. Even in the summaries given within the book, some elements of satire and visual irony can be detected that Savage describes but does not factor into his analysis.

Savage is an enthusiast as well as a scholar; this is a combination that can produce some of the best and most illuminating readings of any cultural phenomenon. It can also lead to a lack of analytical and historical rigor. Sophisticated tools are at our disposal; it does our field a disservice not to use them.

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Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America. By Neil Jumonville. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. xx + 291 pp. \$24.95.)

This study of the New York intellectuals—writers for *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, the *Public Interest*, and other journals—starts with the protests Sidney Hook led against the pro-Soviet bias of the 1949 Waldorf world peace conference. It ends with the 1983 neo-conservative conference at the Plaza Hotel defending American culture against its detractors. Though Neil Jumonville's short biographies of Hook, Dwight Macdonald, Irving Howe, Nathan Glazer, Lionel Trilling, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and Daniel Bell look back to the group's formation in the left-wing, anti-Stalinist circles of the 1930s, this book highlights the group's postwar battles against Communism, mass culture, bohemianism, and the New Left. All these, the New York group believed, rested on romantic or absolutist tenets at odds with skeptical, rational thought and hostile to free inquiry. Defining

and defending the intellectual vocation became the group's collective project, Jumonville writes, and instead of placing these writers at the crossroads of twentieth-century politics, he links them with a tradition of general cultural criticism stretching back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thus their midcentury political shift from Left to Right loses salience, and their postwar work appears "the natural outcome of their early outlook" aimed, Jumonville says, at preserving elite culture against the masses.

Despite Jumonville's attempt to privilege intellectualism as such, he provides evidence of the group's persistent political impulses. Nathan Glazer, for instance, has claimed his academic work "could be seen as the pursuit of politics through other means." Lionel Trilling too strove to maintain the political relevance of his work, while trying to balance it against nonpolitical concerns such as moral judgment, scholarly responsibility, and aesthetic valuation. Indeed, the anxiety Jumonville finds widespread among the group to find balance, poise, or a "sense of proportion" in all things grew in part from the dilemma confronting a style of "criticism" bound by Cold War loyalties to "affirm" prevailing norms. Underlying that dilemma was a decisive political choice—for the status quo—which characterized the postwar experience for most of these writers.

Jumonville treats the group's preoccupation with the status of the intellectual vocation as a high-toned moral exercise. They were troubled, he says, over such questions as "What is sufficient intellectual integrity?" Just as Nathan Glazer recalled his parents' politics as "Socialist, but not too socialist," one wonders whether intellectuals should have integrity, but not too much integrity. The New York intellectuals will be judged, however, not by what they said about being an intellectual, but by what they said (or failed to say) about the world that stretches beyond the Waldorf and the Plaza.

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