



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America. by Neil Jumonville
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Reed concludes his study with a plea to radicals to combine postmodernist populism (jugglery) with precisely felt and reasoned social commitment (belief). He has given us a heartening example of how that can be done.

Luke Spencer, University of Leeds

***Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America.* By Neil Jumonville. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 1991. xix, 291 pp. \$24.95.**

The drawback of a history—even a good one like Neil Jumonville’s—that deals intensively with an intellectual group is that by laws of the genre rather than of life the members come to seem preoccupied with reactions to each other. Loyalties and counter-loyalties, the personal and abstract divisions of infighting, take on an independent life apart from the developments in the world which actually gave the group whatever conscious identity it possessed. The nickname “New York Intellectuals” came late. Like “Transcendentalists,” it was the coinage of hostile observers who disliked and affected to despise the prejudices of the group. The limited solidarity that its members kept—from the Depression to the Cold War, from the *Partisan Review* of the thirties to the *Dissent* of the fifties—was a result not so much of cultural stance (X’s tactical deviation from Y’s revision of Z’s position-taking article) as of agreement on the critical character of certain events. The Hitler-Stalin pact, the dropping of the A-bomb, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968: even to the most inside of insiders, these things mattered more than the perfect truth about the theoretical relation of mass culture to democracy. If the subject can bear another book after Jumonville’s, his successor ought to say something more about the life outside of culture.

Meanwhile, *Critical Crossings* serves as a well-informed guide to writings on mass culture, intellectual freedom, cultural Stalinism, and “the tragic sense of life” by Sidney Hook, Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Nathan Glazer, and a great many others. Jumonville is most thorough in his coverage of the mass culture debate. This was an absorbing interest for the critics in question throughout the fifties, and Jumonville argues plausibly that in their memoirs its importance was displaced by the student revolt of the sixties. Even so, it may be doubted that an “enduring fear of the masses” explains these critics’ dominant skepticism: they sprang from a place much nearer the masses than any previous or subsequent generation of intellectuals, and the same memoirs exhibit neither evasion of nor detachment from those beginnings. Jumonville quotes with approval the strictures of the populist British Marxist Stuart Hall: “by extending and developing their ‘practical critique’ of the dominant culture from a privileged position inside it, they [writers like Greenberg, et al.] have come to inhabit, embody and express many of the contradictions of the system itself.” It is not clear where this leaves the argument. A cow may inhabit and embody a practical critique of the mass culture of milk, but to say it therefore

“expresses” a critique will sound like backhand praise. To accuse the New York critics of “leftist elitism”—as Jumonville does—is only to restate the question. People who can think in any sustained way are always an elite—a minority who find occasional comfort in each other. The task of judgment is to sort out the true thought from the false, to say nothing of the wilder possibilities: aridly true, productively false, altruistic though hypocritical, self-centered and yet inspiring.

Jumonville’s main theme is the contest between “affirmers” and “dissenters,” which he thinks began in the forties and lasted through the eighties. The entity affirmed or dissented from is not spelled out; it appears to be commercial democracy in America as it is now constituted. Jumonville’s sympathies are with the dissenters, but the affirmers are almost given a hearing, and good sense and interviews have helped him to get the details right. (One correction: the meeting between the leaders of SDS and the editors of *Dissent* could not have taken place in “the *Dissent* offices,” which were never much more than a desk and a tray for envelopes.) Now and then a teleological shorthand plays tricks with the history. Private opinions about Trilling, confided to diaries in the forties and later released, are made to look like a wide-open contemporary debate. Harold Rosenberg is said to have struck early readers as an art critic with views on other matters, whereas in fact until the late fifties the impression was nearly the reverse. His essay on “action painting,” writes Jumonville, “rivalled Greenberg’s entire critical output”; but for influence among painters, patrons, critics, and gallery owners, this is simply false. The final pages are disheartening. It is teleological *and* institutionalist to say that in opposing the campus left Glazer, Howe, and others were “defending their cherished institution, the university.” Granted they took sides, they also offered an analysis. What they distrusted about the SDS and the student radicals was their illiberalism—a vice that weighed more heavily with them than the attractive but unearned virtues of youth and energy.

David Bromwich, Yale University

***Ring Lardner and the Other.* By Douglas Robinson. With an essay by Ellen Gardiner. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 1992. xii, 324 pp. \$45.00.**

Once one gets past its complex theoretical issues and specialized jargon, this volume has a good deal to offer. Professor Robinson presents two related volumes in one, along with a “bonus” chapter—“Reading Beyond the Ending”—in which he elucidates his commitment to the “emancipatory,” “extratextual” reading of texts and challenges “objectivist specialization” (the study of single authors) and “objectivist rules of evidence” (e.g., textual and/or biographical criticism).

In his “first” volume, Professor Robinson uses Ring Lardner’s short story, “Who Dealt?” (added in an appendix), to reassess the writer’s life and art and also to outline his own mission as a masculinist critic working in the pro-feminist men’s movement against “patriarchal programming.” No doubt previous “patriarchal” critics of the unnamed female monologist in “Who Dealt?” were unjustifi-