



Levine Responds

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AHR Forum
Levine Responds

LAWRENCE W. LEVINE

THE SYMPOSIUM IS A WONDERFULLY COMPLEX STRUCTURE. It creates the opportunity for a dialogue that can deepen and extend our understanding, even as it furnishes a platform for posturing and distortion.

My essay, as Robin Kelley and Natalie Davis recognize, is about the meaning and significance popular culture has for historians and the ways in which they can use these neglected sources to enrich their understanding of the people who constituted popular culture's audiences. Kelley maintains that I should have had more to say directly about the power relationships between the creators and receivers of that culture. I certainly agree that a lot more needs to be said about this, but I remain unconvinced that this essay was the place to do it for a number of reasons I will return to. Jackson Lears, on the other hand, is under the impression that my essay is primarily about power relationships, that my purpose is not to explore the dynamics and nature of popular culture that make it an essential source for historians but to prove that audiences were so autonomous and triumphant that we need not look at the producers of popular culture at all. Based on these assumptions, he creates a critique of a paper that I don't recognize as the one I wrote.

Lears may be correct in asserting that there are no cultural historians who "would deny consumers a place alongside producers in the process of constructing cultural meanings." The problem is that the world is not composed of cultural historians. The universe I inhabit is filled with professors and students and teachers and lay people who are quite sure that audiences have little if anything to do with the meaning and structure of the popular culture they enjoy and that popular culture is therefore of little significance to scholars and students unless the producers of the culture are the subject; even then, it is not at all clear that the culture they create has anything to do with *their* beliefs, either. I know many otherwise sensitive and perceptive scholars who think that popular culture is so formulaic and unvarying that deep thought about it and extensive research into it are simply not required or even appropriate. I teach in and visit universities where popular music, popular art, popular literature, and popular aesthetics are neither taught nor thought about and where the word "kitsch" still has resonance. At Berkeley, practically the entire corpus of nineteenth-century American art and music, and much of that of the twentieth century as well, is—with a few notable exceptions—ignored. There are large segments of Academe that have not quite

reached the year 1776 and have not yet completely extended the Declaration of Independence to our own culture. In spite of the progress made in recent decades, too many of us still tend to lack the confidence and independence needed to value and comprehend—or, indeed, even to study—the significance of many of the most important cultural forms that have characterized modern America.

This is what my essay is about. I have not attempted to write the definitive work on popular culture in a journal article but to question and break down some of the barriers, some of the rigid categories that have made it difficult for us to understand the nature and the importance of popular culture and to explore some of the misconceptions we have had about culture in general and popular culture specifically, in order to allow us to use it more creatively and intelligently.

But Lears likes boxes and categories; he certainly places me in enough of them. Thus I become not a finite historian trying to comprehend aspects of this central problem to the best of my limited abilities but a “Whitmanesque” obfuscator who clutters the path to truth “with dead horses and straw men,” a “child of Jewish immigrant background” coveting “the old neighborhood, . . . the culture of his childhood . . . longing to belong to a reassuring collective whole,” a “functionalist” user of “therapeutic” sociology, a “utilitarian” who cites reception theory but “ignores” its “most challenging formulations,” a “populist” who uses the writers of the Frankfurt School as “punching bags” and “remains oblivious to the fundamental fact of cultural power,” an unsuspecting follower of “neoclassical economics” who confuses “marketing with democracy,” an innocent who does not even understand the nature of the sources he is using and has to “pretend . . . that the statements he quotes constitute the clear and unmediated voice of the people.” Wow! It would take more than the space I have been allotted to dig myself out of those structures. But I am not sure it is necessary; I do understand enough about reception theory to know that the reader is meant to do some of the work. So, gentle reader, grab your shovel!

I find the comments of Natalie Davis and Robin Kelley more complex, more nuanced, and more helpful. Davis’s erudite comparative framework is especially illuminating. She moves from the value she found in understanding the creation of a sixteenth-century royal letter of pardon to the value that might be derived from a detailed knowledge of how a film or radio serial is put together. That is precisely the kind of research we need, and it is the lack of this detailed knowledge about the dialectic between the creators and the receivers that made me hesitate to make power relationships a central part of this essay. Much of what we know about these relationships is asserted rather than the product of careful study of the details of cultural production. I myself know much more about the audiences of popular culture than its producers. This is precisely why I refrained from saying more about what Kelley calls “the question of power and access to the tools of production,” although I agree that without this part of the equation, we can never fully understand the role of audiences. I also agree that “having a direct voice in cultural production from inception to completion” potentially affords greater power than the kinds of audience participation I describe. This is exactly what I meant when I observed: “In a modern industrial urban society, people are

no more likely to be the exclusive architects of their own expressive cultures than of their own houses or furniture or clothing. Modernity dealt a blow to artisanship in culture as well as in material commodities." I simply tried to argue that this very significant development did not necessarily render people passive consumers, and I attempted to indicate ways in which they retained both leverage and voice.

Above all, I have attempted to move away from that historical universe Jackson Lears populates with subjects and their metaphorical—but nonetheless real—chains. He may state it in slightly more flexible terms and leave a bit more room for input from below, but it is a familiar scenario inhabited by ciphers and their Significant Others, the constrained and their constrainers. I have tried to suggest an alternative set of possibilities in which influence and legitimation do not move invariably in one direction—from the top to the bottom—but are reciprocal matters of interrelationships. If we become too obsessed with power, we risk losing sight of the culture itself. *Whose* culture was being made available to the public via radio and film? *Whose* humor issued from the mouths and bodies of Jack Benny, the Marx Brothers, Amos 'n' Andy? *Whose* music filled the airwaves and sound tracks and dance halls? *Whose* world view was expressed in the soap operas people listened to, the pulp detective stories they read, the popular songs they sang? These remain open questions since we have not yet done the work necessary to answer them, and if we fixate on traditional notions of power and institutional arrangements, we may never find the answers.

Of course there have been significant power shifts, and certainly Robin Kelley is right in arguing that "the reproduction of hegemony ought to be just as important as the power of audiences to invest mass-produced cultural forms with oppositional meanings." Nevertheless, until we do the requisite research into the culture, the institutions, and the audiences, we will not begin to know the exact results of these changes, no matter what our respective ideologies tell us about the putative state of cultural hegemony. What confuses me about the criticisms of Lears and Kelley is that they write as if cultural hegemony has been a neglected thesis. In fact, hegemony is the condition many historians have come to assume existed, and we have to resist the temptation to *imagine* it into being, "without fear and without research," to borrow Carl Becker's phrase.

Kelley raises significant questions about the interaction of technology and orality. I tried to address the effects of literacy on oral black culture in my study of African-American culture, and in this essay I indicated the ways in which oral culture could continue to coexist and even interact with mass culture in the twentieth century, but his fresh and important questions point us in a number of new directions. I agree that I probably should have addressed matters of race and gender more directly. This is not an easy assignment. It is simple enough to demonstrate prejudice and stereotyping; they existed everywhere in the culture. The real question centers once again on matters of relationships. In a society as racially, ethnically, and regionally fragmented as the United States, how does the historian derive meaning? Various racial, ethnic, and regional groups had their own newspapers, their own commercial music, even at times their own films and radio programs. What was the relationship of these discrete cultural productions to the mass cultural expressions meant to reach the entire nation? Do historians

have to subject these nationally distributed cultures to the myriad viewpoints of regional, ethnic, gender, racial, and class groups, or are there central meanings that transcend or cut across American diversity? These are among the unanswered—indeed, too often unasked—questions that I, and I imagine everyone else who has tried to study popular culture, have stumbled over and will continue to stumble over until we pay sufficient attention to matters of culture.

In the title of her comments, "Toward Mixtures and Margins," Natalie Davis has captured this priority exactly. She is entirely right: the margins between cultures and social groupings need to be examined with meticulous care, as do the processes of cultural mixing and syncretism. Along these lines, my Berkeley colleague VÉVÉ Clark and I have been investigating the possibility that much of American culture has been the product of a process of creolization similar to that we recognize as operative in other parts of the world. Davis's suggestion that we examine patterns of tensions and dichotomies that recur in popular responses to and interpretations of cultural artifacts constitutes another way of understanding the attitudes, ambiguities, and beliefs of people we have neglected. I am particularly intrigued by her idea of studying "unpopular" culture as another indication of commonly held feelings and assumptions.

But, even as we seek out patterns and generalities, we also have to distrust simplicities. As I point out in my conclusion, the study of popular culture presents us with new complexities in the form of divergent and disparate voices and views and ideologies. If we are serious about studying popular culture, we are going to have to bring to it fresh eyes and open minds and not force it into the prefabricated molds we carry with us. As we break the crust of the past to study its culture, we have much to learn from the warning Ralph Ellison issued years ago to those studying African Americans: "Watch out there, Jack, there're people living under here."¹

¹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), 123.