

STEFAN HIRT. *Adolf Hitler in American Culture: National Identity and the Totalitarian Other* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013), 652 pp.

Stefan Hirt's book *Adolf Hitler in American Culture: National Identity and the Totalitarian Other* is a far-ranging and ambitious work that tries to explain not only the evolution of Adolf Hitler's image but also how that image of the alien "other" challenged America's insecure self-identity as a nation of individualists and freedom-loving Americans. In order to find a solid hook on which to hang his argument, the author casts a wide net of critical postmodern analysis over the course of the last eighty odd years of American history to discover why and in what way Hitler became a pop-icon of evil in American culture. How does Hirt propose to untie this complicated intellectual knot? His answer is that he intends to concentrate less on Hitler than on what American popular culture made of his image (p. 12). It turns out, however, that the real prey he is after is not so much Hitler or the Führer' image but the problem of American self-identity over the course of American history. This is a tall order, and one that the author handles poorly because his knowledge of US history is culled from one-sided studies; they come from critical, even radical, postmodern historiography and avant-garde filmography. This approach is indicated by the label "Discursive Frameworks" in chapter 3. Discursive means passing rapidly or indiscriminately from subject to subject; rambling, digressive, extending over or dealing with a wide range of topics. The purpose behind this chapter is to advance the theoretical framework underlying this book; its subtitles are identity, Ideology, and cultural memory.

In what follows the author exaggerates the difficulty of the theoretical terminology of postmodern thought, which he then applies to US cultural identity. He focuses on American identity problems, ideological ambiguities, self-serving mythologies, and split-minded cultural memories. There is much talk throughout the book about white, waspish sexual uncertainty, cognitive dissonances, male cold war anxieties (as though women were not equally horrified by the possibility of thermonuclear war), fetishes of various sorts, narcissistic self-glorifications, and so forth. The author is relatively consistent, however, in limiting himself to America's media culture, much of it, admittedly pop or low brow. Pop is

what the public consumes as art or music; it has no standards other than how much of it is consumed and can therefore be quantifiably ascertained. It is vulgar, formulaic, and unoriginal. Pop's products are cartoons, cheap dime novels, popular films, comic books or pulps, and men's magazines, which George Orwell called "yank mags." The author's empirical elements are thus images that Americans have allegedly drawn from these sources. That this can be dignified as "culture" is debatable, unless one defines this much abused term in a purely anthropological sense as the sum total of a people's expressions in a particular time and place. One gets the impression by reading this book that Americans are incapable of higher culture, which is an old European stereotype. The true feelings of Americans are assumed to be embodied in lowbrow cultural expressions. It is true that he discusses a few American historians but only to dismiss their work as either too journalistic or novelistic, as though journalists have not written superb histories or novelists are automatically disqualified because they are unscientific.

In his chapter on discursive frameworks the author highlights the American providential belief that began in colonial times that America was the last best hope of the human race, and that the colonists would transform the virgin continent into a beacon on the hill, a New Jerusalem. He then shows how this theme of American exceptionalism evolved in more secular form during the Enlightenment and the founding of the American Republic. While what he says about American republican beliefs is certainly true, he does not clearly show how American civil religion remained remarkably stable despite rapid socio-economic changes in the nineteenth century. Granted that Americans defined themselves in opposition to British rule, granted even that some ecclesiastics saw themselves battling the Antichrist (George III), there is no justification of taking certain elements in American history as troublesome illustrations of American flaws such as paranoia of the alien other (European tyranny) or the Antichrist (George III). At the very outset of the author's analysis, we can detect what would become a pattern throughout the book. It consists in plucking certain beliefs out of the stream of US history and dissecting them in postmodern deconstructionist terms. Although this creates the superficial impression of academic detachment, it actually conceals

its own ideological subtext. One is reminded of Sir Francis Bacon's "distempers of fantastical learning" in the form of enchantment with words or theories divorced from actual (historical) facts. The author should have known that toying largely with "images" culled from other images and cast in dubious theoretical terminology, the result would be a tangle of confusing propositions.

But what about Hitler's image in American culture? Why does the author regale us with his foray into American colonial history, the new Republic, Federalists vs Jefferson Democrats, and Manifest Destiny, quickly bypassing a huge swath of US history (Civil War, Reconstruction, Industrialization, the End of the Frontier, Populism and Progressivism, and World War I), and alert us to the crisis of the 1930s. Here we learn of America's reaction to the Great Depression, which released deep-seated existential anxieties. It goes without saying that Americans were unhinged by events that left over 20 percent of the workforce unemployed. But the sort of anxieties the author detects go much deeper; they go to the heart of US civil religion and a whole fabric of related mythologies. One was the ideas associated with the myth of the self-reliant man, who now, unemployed and thus emasculated, was threatened with his masculinity. The notion of "government governs less if it governs least" was now in doubt. People looked to a stronger centralized government and a new George Washington, the quintessential American political icon. Americans increasingly glanced abroad to see how the European strongmen managed the economic depression. The result was that all too many Americans found a lot to admire in Mussolini or Hitler. Stefan Hirt now uses this occasion to segue into the Nazi/Hitler topic. He starts with a minor film of the 1930s that has been long forgotten, entitled *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933), a utopian fantasy in which the president is injured in a car accident and begins to act and rule like a dictator to solve the nation's economic crisis.

In discussing Hitler's Image in the US in the 1930s, Hirt is right in arguing that most Americans viewed the spectacle of the strutting Führer not only as distasteful but contrary to their nation's democratic values. Given Hitler's strange personality and provocative bearing, it is not surprising that his image in America was treated with derisive humor and revulsion. Here and elsewhere in

the book, Hirt must be given credit for having dug up myriads of pulp and film material to illustrate his narrative of the reception of Hitler's threatening persona. One of the points he could have hammered home a bit more is how pulps perpetuate misinformation, and not just among the uneducated. A case in point is the old tale that Hitler was a madman who foamed at the mouth and chewed on carpets. This myth, in fact, is worth pursuing because there is evidence that Hitler was well aware that he was ridiculed and despised in the United States. In fact, he suspected that Hollywood, which he believed to be run by Jews, was instrumental in smearing his good name. The facts, however, are to the contrary: Hollywood was very much cowed by the Nazis and did not fully get into the anti-Nazi cause until 1939-40. It should be recalled that Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* was not made until 1940. The book could have been strengthened by showing how Hitler responded to American reactions to his policies. Once the war began, Americans gradually saw the real threat that Nazism presented and the country drew on its arsenal of democratic values and beliefs to respond. Although Hirt discusses the American response to Nazi propaganda, he views it not only as greatly distorted but also as revealing deep-seated psychic fissures. One could argue that these fissures were actually strengths, but Hirt does not address that possibility. What is obvious is that truth is the first casualty in war, and surely Americans can be forgiven if they saw themselves battling evil and thereby protecting western civilization—or what was left of it. To criticize Frank Capra and others for serving up a distorted picture of reality under the circumstances of war is to belabor the obvious. On the whole Hirt's treatment of Nazi and German propaganda is generally sound.

What readers will probably find surprising is Hirt's much lengthier treatment of how Hitler's image was transformed in the post-World War II era. In fact, half of the book deals with the postwar period and America's fond recollection of the "Good War," which inspired countless praise in mass media for the "Greatest Generation" because it defeated Hitler and Hirohito. In pop culture Hitler now appears as the embodiment of evil, and so do all wicked Nazis. To be fair here, Americans still continue to distinguish between Germans and Nazis (they did so even during World War II), giving the benefit of the doubt to the former. Among the pulps the difference did not

matter. All Germans were by nature goose-steppers. Despite the fact that Germans had constituted the majority of immigrants in the nineteenth century and had greatly contributed to American culture, the image of Germany and the Germans was at its lowest nadir in 1945. This was also the case in historical scholarship in the US. Up until the last two decades most Americans who wanted to know more about Nazi Germany were introduced to this topic by reading William Shirer's best-seller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (1959). It is refreshing in this regard to read Hirt's criticism of this unbalanced and wrongheaded work. He rightly faults Shirer's general approach as simplistic and tendentious. *The Rise and Fall of Nazi Germany* is thus more of a long-winded moralistic tract than a work of scholarly history. Hirt also finds some of Shirer's judgments too smug and self-righteous.

In Hirt's judgment, American mass media lifted Hitler's complex personality from its historical framework and turned it into spooky entertainment. To borrow a phrase from Northrop Frye, in its treatment of Nazi Germany American pop culture is full of woo-woo noises and shivery Wagnerian Winnies about the dark goings-on in the Third Reich. It is also true that as a result Hitler has become a kind of silly putty in the hands of American mass media. As the author rightly points out, the Nazi dictator has been variously depicted as "Hipster Hitler," "sexualized Hitler," "quintessential symbol of evil," "egocrat," "first rock star," and so forth. In the end, readers essentially learn what they were told at the beginning of Hirt's book:

American pop culture is obsessively preoccupied with Hitleriana (609). One major preoccupation with Nazi evil, according to the author, is that US pop culture needs evil Hitler as the alien "other" as a contrast to good America. The author shows his cards at the very end of the book by suggesting that George Bush's war in Iraq was whitewashed in the US as a noble democratic crusade, reminiscent of the war against Hitler. The author even manages to slip in the "Tea Party," which is no party at all, in order to clinch his thesis that American self-identity is deeply split, and that its myth-encrusted ideals fall far short of reality.

Hirt's central thesis about America's insecure and split self-identity does not fully persuade because it rests too much on flimsy pop cultural material and the use of arcane postmodern theories to explain it. Judging American culture or any culture for that matter by its lowest common denominator does not entitle us to frame all of a nation's culture in this manner. As previously stated pop or pulp culture is subculture or no culture, unless the term has been emptied of its original meaning as cultivation or civilizing a people to the highest standards, for as Aristotle observed: "man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all." I am suggesting that "pop" culture, as used in this book, is not a Rosetta stone that unlocks the real life of a culture. The application of postmodern theories makes the search for the essence of American culture even more problematic.

Santa Maria

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