

Don't Worry (About Racism), Be Happy (on *The Cosby Show*).

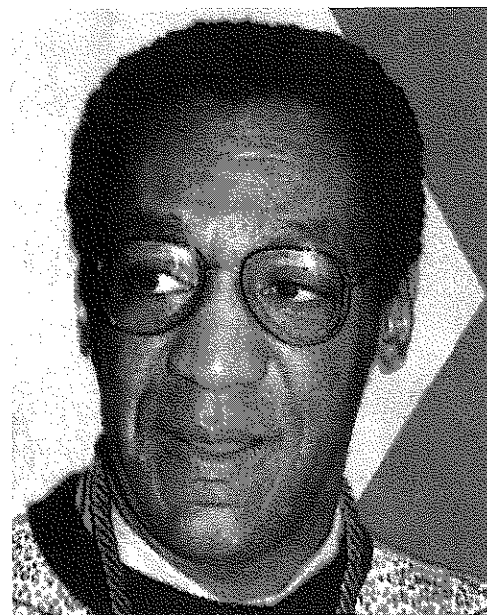
BY Michael Hoechsmann

Sut Jhally & Justin Lewis, **Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream.**

Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1992.

The Cosby Show allows white people the luxury of being both liberal and intolerant. They reject bigotry based upon skin color, yet they are wary of most (working class) black people. Color difference is okay, cultural difference is not.

The reemergence of 'Cultural Studies,' this time on the North American continent, has offered a conjuncture for both a reflection on, and a re-vision of, the project of cultural studies originally articulated in the British context. At best, the newly emergent U.S. cultural studies has moved towards the flattening out of the vertical axis of British Cultural Studies' class-centeredness. Perhaps this levelling comes with the territory, occurring, as Andrew Ross points out, in a culture where "popular culture has been socially and institutionally central," and where the "popular sovereign goes forth in a more modest, republican garb, and drinks a less expensive, carbonated version of the water of life" (1989: 7-14). More significantly, however, the movement of cultural studies in the U.S. towards a more horizontal, if unevenly developed, axis of analysis signals the (tenuous?) 'articulation' of critical theory in the context of social movements of the past thirty years. The result of this shift for cultural studies is to move "its traditional focus away from the conflict between dominant and popular cultures, conceived as unified blocs, [to] turn its attention to the axis between central and marginal cultures, conceived as pluralities" (Ross, 1990: 28). This shift allows, or requires, that social



change be seen as an uneven, often contradictory, process.

At worst, however, cultural studies in the U.S. is emerging as a type of 'reader-response' theory of the media, overlaid by a sometimes impenetrable dose of high theory. At the "Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future" conference (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April 4-9, 1990), Stuart Hall stated that though he did not want to close or to police the field, he was nonetheless concerned about "the overwhelming textualization" of theories of power, politics, race/class/gender, etc. Says Hall: "Culture will always work through its textualities, [but] textuality is never enough" (284). What is vital for Hall is that theoretical and political questions are kept in permanent tension, that one will always "irritate, bother, and disturb the other." And this ultimately requires not confusing "the politics of intellectual work [by] substituting intellectual work for politics" (286).

One of the original strengths of British Cultural Studies was the recognition of the limits of abstract study, and the consequent valorization of 'other' voices than those of the traditional intelligentsia. The method of choice for this extension of the university to the streets of everyday life was ethnography, which offered both a

gauge of popular 'common sense' knowledge and an index of the intelligentsia's efficacy in disseminating its new political agendas. The ethnographic work of scholars such as Paul Willis and Angela McRobbie offered a 'way in' to conceptualizing popular consciousness, often with very surprising results. Of course, ethnography does not provide some privileged route to the truth, nor does it permit the ethnographer to pop the bubble of 'false consciousness.' However, while 'textual' readings of everyday life offer an economic analytical efficacy, created in the scholastic solitude of the 'genius' intellectual, ethnography provides a vital, though not guaranteed, 'way in' to how Gramsci's "mass of people" are "led to think coherently... about the real present world"

(325). And if ethnography does not necessarily provide all of the answers, it does seem to raise the right questions.

Had Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis confined themselves to a textual study of *The Cosby Show*, they would have written a very different book. *Enlightened Racism* is the product of an ambitious research project which looks at how white and black audiences react differently to *The Cosby Show*, and how, within these two groups, socio-economic status affects audience reaction. At the outset of their research, the authors were generally well-disposed to *The Cosby Show*, admitting that "for all of its flaws, Bill Cosby's series, we were inclined to think, had pushed popular culture ever so gently in a positive direction." However, the conclusions which they later drew from their ethnographic research "regarding the show's effects on racism" were "profoundly pessimistic." State Jhally and Lewis: "What we discovered, in essence, was that the social and cultural context that gives the show its meaning turns its good intentions upside down."

At the base of much of Jhally and Lewis's analysis is the statement by Benjamin DeMott that people in the U.S. "can't think straight about class." Television fiction has played a direct role in creating "a world that shifts the class

boundaries upward so that the definition of what is normal no longer includes the working class." Thus, for *The Cosby Show* to be normal on television, the show's characters had to be middle or upper middle class: "What, after all, could be more routine than a lawyer and a doctor, two of television's favorite types of professionals?" For the majority of *The Cosby Show* audience, schooled on the typical class status of television families, the only thing upper middle class about the Huxtables is their material wealth; otherwise they are just a "normal" family. On the other hand, upper middle class viewers, who are "unthreatened by [class] barriers," tend to identify with the Huxtables' upper middle class cultural ethos.

Jhally and Lewis argue that, "having confused people about class, [television] becomes incomprehensible about race." Drawing on the resources of George Gerbner and associates at the Annenberg School of Communications and on their own one week study of prime time television in November 1990, Jhally and Lewis demonstrate that "African Americans have been the beneficiaries of significant upward mobility on television" since the 1970s and that now "working class blacks (particularly those in major roles) are rare on television." (The exception to this is the network news where, for example, black people are still overrepresented in association with drug stories). It is in this context that Bill Cosby intervened to make "a black family acceptable — and respected — among the majority of TV viewers (who are white)." Thus, *The Cosby Show* "has been pivotal in redefining the way African Americans are depicted on television in the 1990s."

According to Jhally and Lewis, to include black people in TV land, the home of "the American dream come true" where "everybody with an ounce of merit is making it," is "to foster damaging delusions." For white audiences, "*The Cosby Show* strikes a deal. It asks for an attitude that welcomes a black family onto TV screens in white homes, and in return it provides white viewers pleasure without culpability, with a picture of a comfortable, ordered world in which white people (and the

nation as a whole) are absolved of any responsibility for the position of black people." This retroactive justification for the disproportionate material success of white people validates the myth of meritocracy and implies that the condition of black people in the U.S. is just and deserved.

For black audiences, on the other hand, *The Cosby Show* diverts "attention from the class-based causes of racial inequality... [and] it throws a veil of confusion over black people who are trying to comprehend the inequities of racism." While black audiences were happy finally to have "successful" role models, the equation of social success with material wealth "derails dissatisfaction with the system and converts it, almost miraculously, into acceptance of its values." Thus, argue Jhally and Lewis: "In a culture where white people now refuse to acknowledge the existence of unequal opportunities, the political consequences of this acceptance are, for black people, disastrous."

Life in the 1980s, outside of the gentle confines of the television set, has not been quite so rosy for African Americans. In fact, the reality of life for young black people living in U.S. inner cities has become increasingly bleak. Out of sight and out of mind, the central core of many American cities is "characterized by extreme poverty, serious and violent crime, high rates of drug addiction, permanent joblessness and welfare dependency, and dramatic increases in out-of-wedlock births and female-headed families." Drawing heavily on the work of William Julius Wilson, Jhally and Lewis describe the decline of the U.S. inner city since the 1940s, documenting not only the withdrawal of industry to the city perimeter, but also the eventual flight of the black middle class. It is the irony of "a racially inflected class structure" that allows affirmative action, an accommodation to the black middle class, to substitute for the social infrastructure which is needed to sustain hope in the U.S. inner cities.

Enlightened Racism pulls no punches. In contrast to the populist tendency in U.S. cultural studies, *Enlightened Racism* does not as much chart 'resistances' to dominant media forms, as, in the spirit of Stuart

Hall's studies of 'Thatcherism,' it tries to locate popular 'common sense' conceptions, regardless of the (possibly pessimistic) outcome. This is both a strength and weakness of the book, as Jhally and Lewis slight the potential for resistances on the part of black audiences who identify with the Huxtables. The possibility that the imaginary identification with the Huxtables could be a socially useful sublimation of black people's real conditions of existence is pooh-poohed by Jhally and Lewis, who suggest that the blurring of fantasy and reality by black viewers is "a wish that everyday life were like television."

Nonetheless, *Enlightened Racism* deserves to be widely read. Much to the authors' credit — and unlike this very review — the book eschews theoretical jargon wherever possible, in order to be accessible to as broad an audience as possible. Given this factor alone, *Enlightened Racism* is an exemplary work for an intellectual community which spends more time textualizing the 'popular,' than communicating to anyone more 'unwashed' than a graduate student.

Michael Hoechsmann is a member of the Border/Lines collective.

Works cited

Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. & trans). New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Stuart Hall. "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies." In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson & P. Treichler (eds.) *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Andrew Ross. "Ballots, bullets, or batmen: can cultural studies do the right thing?" *Screen*, 31:1, Spring 1990.

Andrew Ross. *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

