
Dreams Adulterated by Propaganda

Studs Terkel: *American Dreams Lost and Found*; Pantheon Books; New York.

by Mike Lavelle

A tape recorder, selective interviews and selective editing can be the ingredients of a pop sociology and a best-selling book. Studs Terkel is neither an author nor a sociopolitical sage, though he is celebrated as both by the liberal media eager for a reflection of their liberal views. Studs Terkel is a clever propagandist with a merchant's eye and a pseudo-Marxist feel for the *Zeitgeist*.

He is much aware of the media fondness for fads. In the first chapter of *American Dreams Lost and Found*, Terkel pays homage to the feminist disdain for the beauty contest. We meet a former beauty queen (Miss U.S.A. 1973) who, in retrospect, discovers that: "For many girls who enter the contest, it's part of the American Dream. It was never mine." She also compares herself to a table lamp and proclaims that she hates to curl her hair. *Ms.* magazine and Phil Donahue couldn't have said it better. If she had said, "Gee whiz. I loved it," she wouldn't have been in Terkel's book.

We meet a labor organizer who says of the mid-30's, "Here we had the richest country in the world, and we were hungry. At least people were not going hungry in the Soviet Union." In the mid-30's, Stalin's program of forced collectivization and slaughter of the kulaks (small farmers) caused a massive famine in the Soviet Union which was responsible for the deaths of approximately 15 million people. No questions, no history lesson from Studs Terkel.

We are introduced to an American Indian woman who connects the My Lai massacre of the Vietnam war with the

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Indian wars of the last century. Evil America catches it again. There is no mention by Studs Terkel of the genocide in Cambodia undertaken by the Khmer Rouge nor of the totalitarian hammer atomizing Vietnam nor the general conditions of present-day Southeast Asia. In fact, in this book of interviews collected and edited by Studs Terkel, Vietnam is hardly mentioned and only then with a left-wing perspective, and without even the slightest attempt at objectification, which could adjust the perspective in light of what has happened during the last five years.

Since 1975, thousands of Southeast Asian refugees have settled in America. It's a safe assumption that they could give some stunning insights into the American Dream and the totalitarian nightmare that they fled. There is not one Vietnamese, Cambodian or Laotian refugee who appears in this book. Can anyone imagine a book entitled *American Dreams Lost and Found* written between 1945 and 1950 without even one interview with a European émigré concerning his impressions of America and

Asia.

Studs Terkel does more than merely compile selective voyeuristic collections of interviews for his various books. He has been associated with the media for well over 30 years as an actor, music critic and currently as a talk-show host on WFMT in Chicago. I have seen him operate before a college audience and damn near convince them that the working class in America was storming the socialist gates to utopia. His books *Working*, *Division Street* and *American Dreams* were the backdrops—the expertise. The college kids, eager for contact with the "real world," would be satisfied with a counterfeit reality and even more so when their professors told them that this vox populi guru had his finger on the grassroots pulse of America. The Terkel patter is a mix of socialist Michael Harrington and circus showman P. T. Barnum. Abbie Hoffman, still scratching at his diaper rash, referred to Terkel as "My good buddy" on a Chicago ("Kup's Show") TV program.

I have listened to the Studs Terkel

"Terkel knows where to find America . . ."

—Commonweal

his memories of Nazi horrors? Such a book would have been ignored and/or silently scorned (rightly so) by book reviewers and by the mass media. But today, the media have shifted so far to the left that an Orwellian corruption of history by omission gets a further Orwellian twist by not even having that omission noted by fawning TV interviewers or newspeak book reviewers. Certainly a book of 470 pages with 101 interviews of Americans from all strata of society should have included at least one Southeast Asian refugee. It's amazing that the liberals who are constantly blathering about the "people's right to know" seem to feel that we don't need to know what "peace" has brought to Southeast

show on WFMT for a good part of the last ten years and I have rarely heard an original idea expressed by him or by any of his guests. The program is partially funded by public tax dollars, but the public is seldom represented. What is primarily heard is a constant repetition of the same theme: an exercise in how many ways to say socialism without naming it and how to preach national pacifism without mentioning the consequences of Auschwitz, Vorkuta, Cambodia, Munich and Yalta. No dissent to Terkel's view is ever heard; complaints are simply handled with the claim of "Studs's free and inquiring spirit."

Yet the politics of Terkel are very much out of sync with those of the group

he pretends to represent—that is, the American lower-middle class. He is on the editorial board and is part-owner of the shrillest weekly of the intellectual left, *The Nation*, an associate of *In These Times*, a Chicago-based socialist weekly, and a founding father of the Barry Commoner Citizens Party, which did not have enough citizens to get more than 0.27% of the vote in the recent election. If those are convincing credentials, then Terkel indeed has his finger on the grassroots pulse.

One cliché oft used by Terkel while plugging his latest book on the talk-show circuit is that people tell him after he has interviewed them, “I didn’t know I felt that way.” The self-serving implication of Terkel’s comment implies that he has somehow plumbed some mysterious psychic depth of which even his subjects were unaware. That’s not necessarily so. I was interviewed by Terkel and appeared as Mike LeFever in the first chapter of his book, *Working*. I came across as dispirited and bitter. It’s how I felt at that particular moment. I felt different a week later, and a year later more different still. At the time of the interview (1971) I was working as a laborer in a steel plant and there were rumors that it was going to close down. (It did.) I had a grammar-school education, was 38 years old, had two kids to take care of and no prospects for the future. Mix well with a few shots of bourbon, a few beers and a seemingly sympathetic presence and the bitter feelings just pour out with no attention paid to the tape recorder. It makes for good journalistic copy and it might be great for pop sociologists, but in the ebb and flow of human currents it’s nothing to count on as a statistic or even as a set feeling or trend. A nurse’s aide, in the same book, was portrayed as a gum-popping teenager with a heart that was cold and indifferent to the pains and imminent deaths of her patients. Later, this young lady went on to become a very warm and dedicated registered nurse. About five years after *Working* was published, it toured as a stage play.

I was portrayed as a violent hardhat brute and the nurse as cynical and cruel. No matter the years of change—the play, the counterfeit reality and the bucks to be made were the important thing.

The American Dream is a vision that is constantly changing and being redefined. America shines all the bright-

Grand Allusions

Lewis Lapham: *Fortune’s Child: A Portrait of the United States as Spendthrift Heir*; Doubleday; New York.

by John O’Sullivan

Two books are here reviewed under the one title. There is the book by Mr. Lapham and the book which Mr. Lapham imagines he has written. We glimpse the imaginary book first in the introduction when Mr. Lapham tells us that he has written a series of essays around the theme that after World War II “the heirs to the American fortune got into the habit of thinking of themselves as rich kids.” And in several of the subsequent essays he presents America as a spendthrift heir so rich that he believes nothing can harm him and thus indulges in every wastrel delusion from revolution to “creativity.”

To say that Mr. Lapham develops this metaphor would be a rash understatement. One has at times the impression of watching a 1950’s science-fiction movie in which the metaphor escapes from its laboratory restraints, grows to monstrous size, assaults innocent bystanders and in general terrorizes the neighborhood. No person or thing American is safe from its depredations. Any sort of behavior whatsoever is likely to be seen by it as a vice character-

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er when compared to the totalitarian systems which challenge it. A book is desperately needed to trumpet the virtues of America—its dreams dreamt and delivered. *American Dreams: Lost and Found* is not that book. Its author simply chooses to ignore the history of our time and, consequently, his own subject. He thus falsifies the very reality he proposes to examine. □

tic of great wealth. In his discussion of U.S. foreign policy, for instance, Mr. Lapham states that “the young heir undertook to invade Asia and to provide guns and wheat and computer technology to any beggar who stopped him in the street and asked him for a coin.” Three pages later, however, we are told that “the United States doesn’t take the trouble to notice much of what goes on in the world’s servant quarters.” Among the metaphor’s victims are Mr. Lapham and his writing: suddenly, at the slightest provocation, he will abandon a promising argument and fall to pondering darkly about wealth and its malefactions as if responding to signals transmitted from the metaphor’s spaceship. Whether Americans act cautiously or recklessly, generously or meanly, innocently or corruptly, there is the metaphor in the shadows, waiting to pounce.

As a rule, comprehensive indictments should make us wonder. Are all Americans so guilty? But as the book wears on, it emerges that, in the main, Mr. Lapham has a smaller target than the entire United States in his sights. He is aiming at members of the upper-administrative middle class who are to be found in Congress, the bureaucracy, the large foundations, the prestige newspapers and the higher reaches of corporate life. To this group Mr. Lapham gives the classical name of “the equestrian class.” In Shaw’s *Heartbreak House* Lady Utterwood remarks that “there are only two classes in good English society—the equestrian