

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Darsey. *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. xii + 279 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1876-6.

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This is a challenging but also frustrating book. It's also a book that I have my doubts about reviewing. James Darsey writes from the perspective of a committed gay activist. I believe strongly that anybody can (and should) learn about the history of anybody else. I also believe strongly that a person who does not belong to a group has no business intervening in the politics of that group, because she will not have to bear any consequences if the politics go wrong. At least part of Darsey's concern is what he regards as the emptiness (my term) of contemporary gay politics, and at its heart the book is a polemic for something stronger than commercial acceptance by capitalist America. Taking the matter farther, Darsey recognizes that in a (probably) coming economy of scarcity it will do the cause of gay equality/liberation no good at all to be identified with conspicuous and irresponsible consumption.

Darsey wants more. Both the dust jacket and the hard cover of his book are bright red, not from an identification with Marxism so much as from one with the burning bush of Moses. I don't write that lightly. Darsey has a huge admiration for the prophetic tradition within which he wants to locate radical rhetoric in American culture. The historical part of his book is an argument that to the extent we have lost that tradition, we have lost the best of ourselves and the best potential for a better future.

Darsey uses this perspective to identify the absence of such a tradition which he finds in much American protest. This absence is caused by commerce. Reading him I was reminded of Wordsworth: "The world is too much with us, late and soon/getting and spending we lay waste our powers/little we see in nature that is ours/we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon." The sheer, outraged anger against the existing state of things that

runs through Darsey's book is one of its strongest points.

But from a historian's point of view, I found the argument difficult. Darsey has the courage to wander freely. The subjects of his chapters range from the Old Testament prophets through the American Revolution to the Abolitionist Wendell Phillips and the socialist Eugene Debs to Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society founder Robert Welch. That's quite a list.

Wandering freely has its dangers. It seemed to me as I read the book that on the ground Darsey knows well he writes with absolute surety. But where he reaches into secondary sources his prose bristles with references to other scholars. Let me take just one instance. I have no quarrel with his reading of Wendell Phillips. But I do wonder whether one can sum up the entirety of mid-nineteenth century radical rhetoric with this one figure. Where is Frederick Douglass? Where are Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony? I do not mean a cheap-shot attack on Darsey for leaving the premier black and female figures of the epoch out of the discussion. But I wonder about the exclusion's consequences.

The prophetic tradition of which Darsey writes is extremely powerful, and it has had a huge impact upon American life. A list of prophets that begins with Anne Hutchinson and culminates with Martin Luther King attests to that point. But at least as I read him, Darsey seems to be saying that any attempt to say "yes, it's good, and I want it" leaves Douglass, King, and many other figures of real power out of the picture.

I do not write this to trash Darsey's argument. I'm not sure, in fact, where I stand regarding his point that radicalism in America must mean (I think) radical opposition to most of what America is. I decline to take a stance

on his position within the spectrum of specifically gay politics. I do think that he challenges his readers to look with fresh eyes at several subjects that seemed closed. His book challenged me, and I'm still not sure how to respond. Maybe that's the best reason for reading it.

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