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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack Temple Kirby. *The Countercultural South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995. xii + 110 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1723-6.

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Counterculture in the American South?

In *The Countercultural South*, Jack Temple Kirby convincingly suggests that there are two groups of Southerners which are countercultural: African Americans and poor whites. The three chapters in the book, as Kirby himself points out, could each stand alone. That is to say, this is not a book which necessarily follows an order-chronological, thematic, or otherwise. Following Kirby, then, I will briefly describe each chapter, in turn, and then provide an overall assessment.

In the first chapter, Kirby concentrates on Southern African American “working folk,” discussing their method of negotiation with bosses, describing slave culture, and demonstrating the movement from slavery to sharecropping to the labor movement in this country. Kirby links African Americans’ verbal play (e.g., the double entendre) with their historical class struggle. His argument is that, as slaves, they faced a great challenge to achieve autonomy, and, in their attempts to do this, “they became masters of the arts of concealment and deception” (p. 17).

In the second chapter, Kirby focuses on rural white Southerners, using the adjective “frontierism” to describe their lives, because of their separation from modern developments, such as money, technology, government, and supervision at work. Kirby focuses on a key countercultural behavior common among the poor white Southerners: arson. These people set the woods on fire. Kirby draws upon Bertrand Baird’s explanations for this behavior, which include folk aesthetics (seeing and smelling burning woods was pleasing); comfort and

safety (snakes, varmints, and insects were killed in the process); open range (woods were burned to admit sunlight and induce pasture grass for cows and steers); and revenge (quarreling neighbors would set each others’ woods on fire).

In the final chapter, Kirby attends to the stereotypes of these poor Southern whites—stereotypes casting them as “rednecks” and “hillbillies.” Kirby identifies country music as an outlet for the voice of these countercultural peoples. He examines some of the country greats who have identified with rednecks in their songs, and, indeed, have presented them in a favorable light. These artists include, among others, Merle Haggard, Dolly Parton, Hank Williams, Jr., Charlie Daniels, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and George Jones. This focus on country music was interesting and, I think, could have been extended. Kirby addresses recent songs that are relevant to poor white Southerners’ experiences, but he could have looked back to the folk blues, too, which expressed the life of African Americans in music.

This is a book which would benefit from the author’s inserting his own voice and place in the work. Kirby seemed to identify with the countercultural Southerners he wrote about, but he did not share much with the reader about the nature or origin of this identification. As a sociologist, I feel there is a body of work that would be relevant to Kirby’s thesis: the work on marginality, which dates back to Robert Park and has been elaborated on by other social scientists. The two groups of Southerners that Kirby writes about could certainly be conceptualized

as marginal groups—marginal to the dominant or mainstream culture.

In this book, Kirby is sociologist, economist, and historian. Each chapter could be expanded into a book. Indeed, the expansion of the final chapter into a book on the prototype of the “redneck” and the reaction of country music artists to this prototype would especially be

interesting to students of popular culture.

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