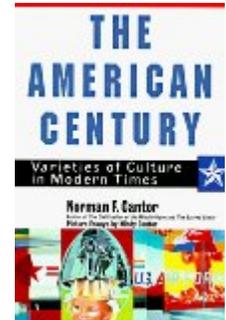


Norman F. Cantor. *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times.* New York: HarperCollins, 1997. xiv + 591 pp. \$32.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-017451-4.



Reviewed by Christopher Berkeley

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A new century is nigh; the incoming horde of freshmen peeking out from underneath their backward-turned baseball caps this fall will be graduates (some of them) in 2001, the first graduating class of a new century. The season is ripe, then, for a book like Norman Cantor's *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times*, which attempts to survey twentieth-century culture in Europe and the United States from its roots as a reaction against Victorianism to *fin de siecle* postmodernism.

This is not a timid book. Cantor is inclusive in his coverage, explaining and commenting on twentieth-century physics, genetics and medicine, legal thought, literature, higher education, and Quentin Tarantino, just to name a sample. To manage such an ambitious work, Cantor organizes his subject around five major topics: modernism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and liberal political thought, political conservatism, and postmodernism.

For Cantor, modernism began in the early years of the twentieth century with the revolt against Victorian morality and historicism, and

was largely spent as a movement by the Second World War. While he views modernism cutting across many fields—quantum mechanics in physics, the Bauhaus in architecture, and Cubism in painting, for example—Cantor's treatment of modernism is centered on literature, epitomized by T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound. Here he delineates several strands of modernism, such as the "classical" modernism of Eliot and the "expressionist" modernism of Yeats.

The next section of *The American Century* Cantor devotes to Freud and his followers, down to the muddled state of psychoanalytic theory today. In these chapters, the strongest in the book, Cantor provides an intellectual genealogy from Freud and his immediate followers, tracing the impact of psychoanalytic thought on such figures as Jung, Bettelheim, Piaget, and Lacan. Though one interpretation might discuss Freudianism itself as an aspect of modernism, since Cantor believes modernism peaked by the 1940s, he considers only the early Freud a modernist. Treatment of later thinkers who used Freud in sociological

theory, such as the Frankfort School, Cantor calls structuralists or neo-idealists.

The next two sections of the book are devoted successively to Marxism and leftist political theory, and Fascism and conservative thought. Cantor traces the influence of Marx using much the same intellectual-genealogical method earlier employed on Freud, but it does not fit as cleanly here, as not all left-liberal political thought can be traced back to Marx in the same way psychoanalytical thought has its origins with Freud. He then gives equal time to Fascism and conservative thought, arguing their bases in nationalism and social hierarchy.

Cantor's treatment of postmodernism provides the weakest analysis of the five major sections of the book, treating it essentially as a kitchen-sink category of anything that comes after the 1940s: poststructuralism, Levi-Strauss, deconstructionism, and feminism, to name a few. In short, he treats postmodernism absolutely literally: postmodernism is everything after modernism.

Everyone will find something to dislike about this book, which is the obvious hazard of such a wide-ranging survey. It would be unfair though, to nibble Cantor's effort to death with a thousand pecks, pointing out that he does not explain Merleau-Ponty's influence on Foucault's thinking, for example. Cantor partially protects himself against this type of criticism by explicitly aiming this book at the general reader rather than the academic. If the only difficulties *The American Century* presented were scholar's hobby-horses, the book would be a success.

Unfortunately, the problems are far more extensive. The work contains a number of simple errors a fact checker should have corrected (e.g., Frank Lloyd Wright established a studio in Scottsdale, not Taos). Cantor sometimes states as accepted fact matters that are still debated by historians (e.g., the evidence that Jefferson slept with his slaves). The quality of the writing is uneven, and the authorial voice wanders from rather standard

academic prose to the flippant and personal; for example he writes, "Under Nixon and Carter, one a crook and the other a wimp, there was a very substantially expanded affirmative action program ..." One might agree in some degree to either appellation, but in this context the name-calling is gratuitous, and worse yet, banal.

Just as there are ground-level problems of accuracy and writing, larger problems of structure and explanation hobble *The American Century* as well. The book has no overarching framework which works to shape the material Cantor covers. The results, predictably, are scores of explanatory tangents, dead-ends, and misplaced emphases.

The analytical weakness caused by lack of organizing idea is exemplified by an appendix to *The American Century*, called "Cultural Analysis Through Film." Rather than an analysis, this is simply a list of a few dozen movies with a paragraph or so of commentary on each. Some of the comments are pithy and insightful, though many are not. But there is no real idea behind the list itself; they just constitute a list of films Cantor has happened to see. Perhaps the press demanded such coverage to attract readers?

That precisely is the problem with the entire book: rather than a real survey or interpretation, it is nothing more than an agglomeration of ideas which have found their way into Cantor's head. This is why a book on contemporary culture contains extraneous paragraphs about obscure historians of medieval Europe (Cantor's specialty). This is why a reader of *The American Century* might conclude the center of the academic world is New York University, which is mentioned dozens of times, far more than any other school (Cantor teaches there). This is why this reviewer, apropos of nothing, knows that the health plan covering NYU faculty members pays only one-third the cost for psychological counseling.

Contrary to Cantor's intent, perhaps this is a book for academics. A scholar of the late twenty-first century investigating the intellectual world

of a century earlier might profitably turn to *The American Century* to discover the contours of a New York academic's intellectual life. Those looking for an interpretive survey of twentieth-century culture, though, should look elsewhere.

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