

T.V. Reed**The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movements to the Streets of Seattle.**

University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 216 pp.

\$US 24.95 paper (0-8166-3771-7), \$US 74.95 hardcover (0-8166-3770-9)

In the past twenty years or so, students of social movements have rediscovered the importance of culture. European theorists of post-industrial movements (like Touraine or Melucci), whose works were translated into English in the 1980s, have helped to inspire researchers to rethink their commitment to mobilization and political process approaches through a rediscovery of culture. Even some theorists most associated with the mobilization paradigm (Gamson, Oberschall, McCarthy) have recognized the importance of culture in protest.

In *The Art of Protest*, T.V. Reed focuses on the dramatic actions of U.S. social movements. His book serves as an introduction to the movements, but also offers a new perspective. The author's claims are modest, his goal being to reinterpret and synthesize elements already available in the large body of literature through cultural issues. By doing so, he challenges easy distinctions between culture and politics, and questions how culture works in and around movements. From "We shall overcome" to cyberculture, Reed pairs each movement with a defining cultural practice: singing with the Civil Rights movement, drama with the Black Panthers, poetry with Women's Rights, murals with Chicano/a movements, movies with the American Indian Movement, rock music with actions against famine and apartheid, graphic arts with action against AIDS, literature with the environmental movement, and cyberculture with the Global Justice movement.

The book's main focus is the civil rights movement, with music and religion as the forms of culture at its centre. Although measuring subjective change or a change in consciousness is a challenge, Reed believes that "freedom songs are one of the best records we have of the transformation of consciousness in the ordinary people, the masses, who took part in the movement" (p. 14). Yet music did not enter the movement spontaneously. A legacy had to be uncovered and reworked, sometimes with radical alterations, adding political content to the emotional content. "Three clusters of events in particular are key to the rise of both the music and the movement: the Montgomery bus boycott, the student-led sit-ins, and the Albany, Georgia, movement" (p. 16). A musical group from Albany, the Freedom Singers, played a role in singing the movement's story and raising funds through their concerts, thereby bringing the movement's messages to the North and to young people while helping to create a network for the Freedom Summer of 1964. Freedom songs brought people together and became "litanies against fear" (p. 25). Music transformed the personal and collective identities of the movement's activists; it was not the only force shaping the movement's identities, but it was certainly a strong one.

Taking a more radical approach, the black power movement used drama to change society, often through the media, which loved the highly dramatic, stylized confrontations. The cultural front of the black power movement managed to launch new messages of black pride and empowerment that exerted considerable influence. The television screens in the late 1960s United States were filled with images of the Panthers "looking both black and powerful" (p. 53). A new black aesthetic was spreading not only in the arts, but in everyday life (clothing, hairstyle, gestures) as well. Today this

legacy is audible (and visible) in certain rap groups and artists who borrow some of their messages from the Black Panthers, not without some ideological confusion.

No social movement in the past fifty years has had a greater cultural impact than the women's movement, which has tremendously changed everyday life, including laws and political institutions, and it used poetry as a medium for doing so. Poetry is particularly well equipped to challenge two dichotomies: the separation of private and public spheres, and the split between "emotion" and "intellect" (p. 91). More than any other movement, the women's movement has challenged the division between the cultural and the political. According to Reed,

"Some social scientists divide social movement activity into (serious) 'instrumental' social and political action, and (merely) 'expressive' cultural activity. We will never find the real women's movement if we use these categories. Culture was a prime 'instrument' of change for the movement, not some decorative, 'expressive' addition" (p. 79).

In an effort to cover a larger cultural and political spectrum, Reed evokes a heritage of struggle and art celebrated in the Chicano Murals of the Los Angeles area. The author finds multiple levels of interpretation: this art form can be seen as a way to reclaim space; it can express pride and celebrate culture; or it can serve as a tool to expose violence, exploitation or other problems. He then discusses three fictional films that deal to one degree or another with the American Indian Movement (AIM), the "most famous and infamous native organization of the red power era" (p. 129), a group which used high drama and staged events to bring its oppression to light, culminating in the two-and-a-half-month Indian occupation of the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota in spring 1973.

The next cultural act of protest is embodied in mid-1980s rock and roll activism. Despite their contradictions and limitations, "'benefit rock' events are important because they are among the most compelling attempts to create moments of 'popular global culture,' in contrast to 'global pop culture'" (p. 157). Reed's affirmation leads us to believe that he sees popular culture as a zone of significant political resistance when in this case, and he shows that without question, these efforts carried one of the most problematic humanist ideas: patriarchal charity. Did the insipid song "We Are the World" change the world? No. It reinforced Western ethnocentric racism by presenting Africans not as capable social actors, but rather as victims (of natural disasters or of their own technical inabilities).

One key argument of this book—that all movement politics involves a degree of cultural politics—owes much to recent activist groups like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). In the early 1980s, a new disease, which came to be known as AIDS, emerged in the United States, while the social disease of homophobia was on the rise in a time of right-wing ascendancy in national politics. In the face of neglect by government and the medical system, the gay community had no choice but to self-organize, tying the AIDS crisis to the politics of lesbian and gay liberation. In addition to fighting visible "enemies" such as government or media bias, ACT UP recognized that they were also fighting an invisible force: social norms that define what is normal/abnormal, natural/unnatural and appropriate/deviant. Strategies developed accordingly, aimed at bringing these invisible norms out into the open where they could be challenged. People discovered a playful cultural coding (graphic images, slogans, costumes and highly theatrical demonstration style) interlaced with controversial actions.

This playfulness was also visible in anti-globalization activism, in the carnival atmosphere of some gatherings, from the “Battle of Seattle” to more recent events. As Seattle was a turning point in the corporate antiglobalization movement(s), Reed dedicates his last analysis to what is new in cultural resistance. Independent media and protest art groups are described as quite inventive in bringing global justice issues to light.

Renowned cultural and literary critic Edward W. Said once said that “culture is a way of fighting against extinction and obliteration.” Culture has also been a way of fighting against all forms of oppression. For sociologists at the beginning of the twenty-first century, social movements are no longer theorized as corresponding solely to the concrete interests of organized social groups; they combine in a creative and challenging way political action with cultural motivations (and cultural practices with political motivations).

T.V. Reed obviously has an in-depth knowledge of the subject and provides the reader with a lot of facts and descriptions. However, the dual intention of the book (to serve as an introduction and to renew cultural analysis of the social movements of the twentieth century) is not always well served: novices will not necessarily have the tools to follow the analysis and scholars will find a lot of *déjà vu*.

Caroline Désy
Université du Québec à Montréal
desy.caroline@uqam.ca

Caroline Désy specializes in social movements, ideologies and discourse analysis; her current research examines the discourse of political protest and the cultural practices associated with antiglobalization movements.

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/artofprotest.html>

March 2006

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online