

Editorial Foreword

Social Conflict in Popular Culture. For sober scholars popular culture is as troublesome as sex—everyone agrees that it must be significant; in every society its signs are unavoidable, and it remains embarrassing. To discuss it joyously implies low taste, to apply the steely tools of conventional literary or sociological analysis risks destroying the specimen. The most effective studies (usually of contemporary cultures or very distant ones) benefit from borrowed frameworks (commercial and institutional constraints, anthropological theory) while providing few models for the study of popular cultures that are not commercial and thrive in societies that also have a distinctive formal culture. There are enough examples to prove it can be done, however; and there is reason to expect that more such studies will be stimulated by current interest in semiotics, cultural anthropology, women's studies, and social history. "Popular" culture implies another, a higher or more formal culture, one that is admired but not in practice so widely shared. Such qualifications have their own intellectual history, and we need to recognize in them the (especially Western) tension between religious and secular realms, a socially based resistance to the claims of professional intellectuals, and a heritage of regretful rediscovery by cultivated democrats of the people's persistent vulgarity. There are no formulas for properly studying the forms and content of popular culture nor for determining its social purpose. Its connections to social structure and formal culture must be explored in specific contexts, and the important questions must be considered comparatively. Scholars of every social science and of the humanities can contribute (and have done so), but the current vitality of the subject reflects not only internal developments within academic research but real stresses in single societies (to which conservatives, nationalists, Nazis, Marxists, religious movements, artists, and intellectuals have offered solutions) and between societies forever forced to encounter each other. *CSSH* looks forward to a lively part in these explorations.

In this issue Sarah White considers the sexual language of French *fabliaux* and finds behind preoccupations familiar to Freudians the expression of serious human conflict. A "comic outlook," as she labels it, lampoons nuns and knights, husbands and wives; and the power or perhaps the safety of humor recalls the discussions of cartoons in earlier issues of *CSSH* (see especially the discussion of political caricature by Appel, 13:4; Coupe, 11:1; Streicher, 9:4; and Alba, 9:2). Is obscenity in itself a form of social aggression? White's treatment of medieval texts ends with Boccaccio, who provides the starting point for John Marino's very different study of early modern Naples; and interestingly, both essays feature the symbolism of rings and the disruptive

challenges of markets. These popular cultures tie sexual exploits to the world of clever bargaining. For Marino, too, humor is serious; and the trickster becomes a stereotype of the marginal Neapolitan shrewdly making do in a declining society. The analysis of social types (as in Lenaghan's treatment of Chaucer in *CSSH*, 12:1) and of ritual conflict (which is most accessible in drama: note Nash on Mayan Passion plays, Peacock on Javanese folk drama in 10:3, and Wertz on English morality plays in 12:1) can suggestively reveal the coherent perceptions through which popular culture comprehends the society it cannot command.

Ethnic Discrimination. Ethnicity remains endlessly fascinating, especially to social scientists whose disciplines were unprepared for its persistence despite the universalisms of modernization, socialist equality, mass communication, and technological efficiency. That surprise still shows in the questions we ask; but more fundamental, to study ethnic identity is to study the intersection of culture, economic change, social structures, and politics. The topic therefore invites, and almost requires, a comparative framework. In this issue four essays explore four questions: how such identity can be formed (and the invented identity of European burgers in Sri Lanka is a particularly challenging and fresh example, sensitively explored by Dennis McGilvray), how it can be preserved (and Yael Katzir establishes the combined importance for Yemeni Jews of formal recognition and systematic isolation), how ethnic discrimination can appear to be purposeful exploitation even when it is not (and Paul Kratoska here explores a prominent myth about the ethnic division of labor in British Malaya), and how racist myths can influence and even extend structural discrimination (Samuel Surace's argument about the treatment of Mexican Americans). Values and structures intersect at every point. The minorities discussed in these articles are not those that form separatist movements or require special political controls (see Horowitz, in 23:2, and Smooha, in 22:2), but each case calls for comparison with dozens of others, such as Wilkie's of colonials and marginals (in 19:1). McGilvray's burgers, who contrast with the more cosmopolitan foreign elite of Egypt (Tignor, 22:3), constructed defenses whose symmetry to the altered notions of caste among immigrants from India (Moore, 19:1) is striking. Katzir's Jews in Yemen, more isolated even than the Jews of China (Rhee, 15:1), exemplify some of the general points about Jewish communities developed by Sharot (16:3 and 22:3). Kratoska's study of British policy in Malaya can be understood as a special case of the economic crisis in Southeast Asia analyzed by Baker (in 23:3), and Surace's points about Mexican Americans are strengthened by comparison with Chinese Americans (Wong, 20:3) and Holden's work on a more classic pattern of assimilation (in 8:2); the pattern of prejudice he finds is consonant with much of the burgeoning literature on America's minorities (see Blessing's review article in 22:3).