

## Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

Vicious is the only word to describe Robert McChesney's review of my book *Images of American Life: A History of Ideological Management in School, Movies, Radio, and Television* in the Fall 1993 issue of *History of Education Quarterly*. In contrast to McChesney's statements that "Spring does not advance much of an argument" and that the book "may have some value if used selectively in lower-level classes," George Black opens his review of this book in *The Journal of American History* (September 1993, pp. 731–732), by noting: "Joel Spring . . . has written an important and, at times, fascinating account of the impact of pressure groups in the United States in the twentieth century." He concludes the review, "It deserves serious reading by American historians and would make excellent supplemental reading in social history classes."

And, in contrast to McChesney's spiteful comment that "the selection of the various chapter topics appears to have been done almost at random,"—a comment that appears to reflect a lack of careful reading of the book—Edgar Friedenberg offers a different assessment in opening his review in *The Review of Education* (Vol. 15, pp. 141–145): "*Images of American Life* is one of the most important books I have ever read . . . It is good because of the thoroughness and detail of its scholarship, and the clarity with which it discusses complex relationships." McChesney must be surprised after writing, "Spring never makes a coherent argument," that the book was selected in 1993 as a Critic's Choice by the American Educational Studies Association for its contribution to educational studies.

The review is vicious because of the completely erroneous statements by Mr. McChesney that: "He draws entirely upon secondary sources," and "Spring appears to have made his selections based upon what secondary literature he could find. . . ." In a personal letter to me, McChesney qualifies these statements: "I used the terms primary and archival synonymously which I concede is a narrow definition." Even with this narrow definition the statements are not true since I used the archives at the CBS library in New York (check p. 278 of the endnotes). In addition, a great deal of my education, and education and movie sources were drawn from the Proceedings of the National Education Association. I spent many months in the New York Public Library reading through every issue of *Variety*. I used Congressional hearings as sources for discussions of juvenile delinquency and comic books in the 1950s. McChesney's erroneous statement, or narrow definition of primary sources without clarification (however you want to view it), is obviously petty and damaging to the book and to me. That's why I consider it vicious. It certainly does not represent scholarly honesty.

While McChesney quotes the purpose of the book at the beginning of the review—an analysis of "the effect of political and economic forces

on the ideas and values disseminated to the general population by public schools, movies, radio, and television”—he never discusses this argument in the rest of his review. Interestingly, every other reviewer commented on the complex nature of the argument. In fact, McChesney seems not to have carefully read the book as reflected in statements, for example, “[he] misstates the nature of the fight over broadcast policy at that time [1930s].” I never focused on general broadcast policy in the 1930s. I wrote one chapter about the debate in the 1930s between educators and radio leaders on the control of national culture and one chapter on the censorship of children’s radio in the 1930s. I never analyzed nor claimed to do original work on general broadcast policy during this period. I spent my time in the CBS Library examining the reasons why a censorship code was imposed on children’s radio and the consequence of that code for the “Images of American Life” disseminated to children. My goal was to compare those images to the ones being disseminated by schools and movies in the 1930s. Certainly in his review, Friedenberg saw that as my purpose. In fact, he quotes one of the key summaries of the shifting images being presented to the public (see *Images of American Life*, pp. 183–184). Why didn’t McChesney understand and discuss the linkages I make between the images disseminated by schools, movies, radio, and television?

Joel Spring  
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To the Editor:

I find it awkward but necessary to reply to Joel Spring’s letter concerning my review of *Images of American Life*. I hope those interested in this exchange will read my review and scan Mr. Spring’s book. I think they will see that I made a professional review which revealed no viciousness or spite toward Mr. Spring or *Images of American Life*. In fact, I think readers might be surprised to see that I had some nice things to say about the book, which has informative and provocative sections. Because Mr. Spring has decided to attack my motives and my character in the process of responding to my review, however, allow me to restate my points with more candor than I had originally intended.

I stand by all of my criticism. We may have a legitimate disagreement on the meaning of “primary” research; I use the term synonymously with archival. At any rate, semantics aside, trade publications and a few corporate press releases are no substitute for archival sources. *Images of American Life* would have been a vastly more impressive work had Mr. Spring taken the additional time to get into the corporate and government archives. It is there, and only there, that historians can begin to get to the bottom of the issues he proposes to address in this study.

In my review I mentioned the lack of primary sources in passing, not as a pointed criticism. Given the scope of Mr. Spring's project, his lack of archival research might have been acceptable had he kept to a coherent train of thought and then thoroughly mined the available secondary literature, newspaper accounts, and trade publications. He proposes in his introduction to incorporate education and movies into Herman and Chomsky's seminal propaganda model from *Manufacturing Consent*. Had Mr. Spring gone ahead and examined how elite interests do (and do not) dominate education and entertainment, in the sophisticated manner that Herman and Chomsky reveal they dominate journalism, he may well have then written a major work. Not only does Mr. Spring not accomplish this task, he does not even attempt it. He never mentions Herman, Chomsky, or the propaganda model again after much fanfare in the opening pages. Nor does he stick to any other model that he discusses in his introduction.

Without a clear conceptualization, theory, or model to guide his study, Mr. Spring provides a muddled and wishy washy argument. He concludes by acknowledging that he cannot shed much light on the interconnections among the various phenomena he has set out to describe and there is little sense that he even attempted to draw meaningful conclusions from his study. Mr. Spring's refrain that he has described the "complexity" of everything, as if that was some sort of accomplishment, is unsatisfactory. As C. Wright Mills once noted, academics delude themselves if they think by saying something is complex, they have provided subtle or sophisticated analysis. It is the duty of scholars to get beneath complex surfaces and do the difficult and occasionally dangerous work of determining why things are as they are, so we may change things if necessary.

I think that if people look at my review they will see that far from being vicious or spiteful, I attempted to give Mr. Spring the benefit of the doubt. His chapters on broadcasting, where I have conducted some research, were unimpressive by any standard. His chapter on 1930s radio had numerous interpretive and factual errors, which suggests a lack of diligence that does not inspire confidence. He characterizes the leading educator opponent of commercial broadcasting during this period, Joy Elmer Morgan, as a woman and as the president of the NEA. Morgan was neither. He concentrated on 1934 as the year of conflict when, in fact, the most intense fight took place in 1931 and 1932. I downplayed mistakes like these in my review and allowed that Mr. Spring probably was more rigorous in his education chapters. For the sake of those students that might be assigned *Images of American Life*, I hope this is the case.

In sum, I agreed to write this review, not knowing of Mr. Spring or his previous work, because I believed the book's topic to be of the utmost importance. I reviewed the book as an earnest attempt at serious schol-

arship. *Images of American Life* hardly qualifies on that score. Mr. Spring's book was hastily prepared, thinly researched, and weakly argued.

I confess that I have been surprised by Mr. Spring's response to my review. Since its publication, Mr. Spring has sent irate letters characterizing me as intellectually dishonest to prominent senior faculty members at my university, where I presently am untenured. He has sent me passages from other reviews of *Images of American Life* to suggest that I should repudiate my own professional judgment. He has sent me a long list of the many books he has authored to suggest that I am out of line to criticize his work. I can only wonder why Mr. Spring is reacting so hysterically to my one measly review. Why doesn't he merely bask in the glow of all his favorable reviews?

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*Editorial Note:* Letters to the editor are published verbatim.