

America, Edwin Black's investigation into the background of eugenics and the people who vigorously promoted it is among the most thoroughly researched studies to date. His presentation is balanced; the story it tells is fascinating—and frightening.

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### *Blue-Collar Hollywood*

#### *Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film*

By John Bodnar

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Pp. xxxiv, 284. Illustrations, notes, sources, index. \$42.95.)

For nearly a century, working people—ordinary men and women—have been frequent subjects in one of the most powerful forms of mass culture: the American film. In *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, historian John Bodnar presents an important investigation and critique of characterizations of working people in “the movies,” and of the way in which film-making interacts with American political and social traditions.

Bodnar brings his understanding of political, social, and cinematic history to bear on a number of significant films, arranged by era from the 1930s to the 1990s, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Pride of the Marines*, *A Street Car Named Desire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Raging Bull*, and *Norma Rae*. As intriguing as the author's investigation into the characters populating the movies themselves is his history of the development of American political culture over sixty years, and of how that culture, in turn, shaped the nature of the film industry and its

product. Bodnar demonstrates a superb grasp of relevant political theory as well as current historiography to underpin his analysis of the movies. His interpretation of the role of the family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, includes a presentation of the essential film narrative and analysis of character roles, a sense of the production issues and decisions that affected the resulting film, an examination of the political and social cultures of the era and their relationships with the film, a review of public and governmental engagement with the film, and finally, his analysis of the interplay among these variables.

The main theoretical thrust of Bodnar's book lies in his interest in the relationship between Hollywood's portrayal of working people and the power of two principal (and often competing) American political traditions: liberalism and democracy. As such, the work addresses a wide range of social and political issues, such as

the roles of family and women, race, social and economic class, the impact of war and McCarthyism, civil rights, poverty, and much more. Bodnar concludes that, like American society at large, movie images of ordinary people were never constant: their values and principles evolved within, and were reflective of, the fluidity and evolution of political culture.

Criticism of this work is largely a matter of interpretation, rather than of factual disagreement. It is by nature a theoretical and critical study, and a selective one at that. The range of films investigated is small compared to the universe of movie production over the past six decades. The author does not claim comprehensiveness—an impossible task—but one could debate Bodnar's selection of films for review. For example, a full discussion of film noir would have been appropriate for this work. A truly American genre with a tremendous impact upon movie making, film noir explored working-class issues of post-

war disillusionment, urban malaise, crime, labor, and the fundamental economic and social failings of liberalism and democracy. And scholars could, of course, debate the author's particular interpretations of recent political writings and history.

Such criticisms will not, however, detract from the conclusion that Bodnar has written a fine book. It is a significant work and should be read by those who seek insight into the role of the film industry in mass culture, its interaction with politics and society at large, and its portrayal of the majority of people living in the United States: ordinary working men and women.

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### *Behind the Gates*

#### *Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America*

By Setha Low

(New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. xi, 275. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.00.)

Recent political debates have focused on the power and function of the public and private economic sectors in determining land use in our suburban nation. The traditional public role in the development process—of providing public infrastructure and pub-

lic spaces—has been transformed under the banner of fiscal conservatism and as a reaction to unwanted sprawl. Additionally, fear of crime and of the erosion of property values has promoted the insularity and anti-urbanism manifest in the prolifera-