

PART I

Reclaiming the Political in Popular  
Culture



## *Norma Rae*: Character, Class, and Culture<sup>1</sup>

The notion of class in America has an elusive quality. In objective and structural terms it is a paramount fact in American society. Yet the complexity and dynamics of class relationships, particularly the dynamics of class struggle, have been treated by mass culture in terms that both depoliticize and flatten the contradictions inherent in such relationships. In other words, the concept of class has been reduced to predictable formulas that represent forms of ideological shorthand. Needless to say, Hollywood has played no small role in dealing with class-based issues in such a way as to strip them of any critical social meaning. This becomes particularly evident when examining how Hollywood has defined working-class life and culture.

With few exceptions Hollywood's treatment of working-class people and events has been characterized by the type of reductionism that functions merely to reinforce those myths and values that provide the ideological bedrock for the existing system of social relations. Both the form and content of Hollywood films about the working class render the latter flat, one-dimensional representations that tell us nothing about the deeper concrete reality of working-class life and struggle. In effect, the portrayal of working-class life and culture is organized around concepts that contribute to its camouflage. Social mobility replaces class struggle in films like *Saturday Night Fever* and *Blood Brothers*. Images of neurosis and feelings of insanity abound in films like *Joe*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, and

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*Taxi Driver*. Masculine adoration and the celebration of racism and sexism provide the characterization in films like *Rocky*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Blue Collar*. Moreover, while the recent infatuation with the working class may seem refreshing, in reality it is simply a recycled and pale version of the old.

The myths haven't changed and neither has the ideology that informs Hollywood's perception of American society. Freedom is still a personal matter, cast in individualistic terms. Privatism is still the conceptual umbrella that reduces social problems to personal ones, and struggle is still viewed as a solitary rather than a collective endeavor. The point here is that if one views Hollywood as part of an ideological apparatus that functions in the interest of social and cultural reproduction, its treatment of the working class should come as no surprise. Of course, Hollywood's treatment of the working class should not be seen in either mechanistic or conspiratorial terms. Hollywood tycoons are not meeting in small rooms, plotting against the American working class. Such an image is vulgar and absurd. It might be more fruitful to view Hollywood ideology less as a result of conscious lies than as a worldview so closely related to the dominant structures of production that the relationship is not a conscious matter of reflection. In other words, the prevailing ideology that dominates this country is so pervasive and powerful that it goes unquestioned by those who hold power, that is, without carrying this too far we might say that the field and force of ideology becomes particularly powerful when illusion becomes a form of self-delusion. Of course, even in Hollywood there are contradictions, and occasionally decent films will get produced.

Amid such contradictions, films are occasionally produced that capture the real nature of the problems they portray; moreover, this sometimes happens in spite of the writer's or director's intentions. *Norma Rae*, written by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., and directed by Martin Ritt, may be such a film. *Norma Rae* is a penetrating film about class struggle. It is also a film about unionizing and feminism, but these are subordinate themes, delicately woven into the objective and subjective patterns of working-class culture and everyday life.

The story, based on an actual event, tells how a fast-talking, middle-class union organizer named Reuben Warshovsky (Ron

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Liebman) comes to a small southern mill town to organize the textile workers of the O.J. Hanley Plant. In the course of his struggle Reuben meets and enlists the aid of Norma Rae (Sally Field), a tough, southern working-class woman who appears to be caught between a comforting cynicism and the disquieting possibility that there are no other places to go in her life. Trapped between the imperatives of an alienating job, obligations to her two children, and the mixed love-hate relationship she has with her overly protective father (Pat Hingle), Norma Rae has little time to think about the nature or complexity of the social and political forces that shape her life. Under Reuben's continual prodding, however, she finally joins him in organizing the workers in the cotton mill, a struggle which they eventually win. But *Norma Rae* is not just about union organizing; it is more subtly concerned with the specificity of lived experience of class struggle and class solidarity. The film is not meant to provide a false utopian faith in the power of unions as much as it offers viewers an article of faith in the power of men and women to struggle together to overcome the forces that oppress them.

The slowly developing relationship between Reuben and Norma Rae becomes the pivotal force that informs the rest of the film. It is a relationship that is rich in its characterization of the forces that define the nature of each participant's class experience. Most importantly, however, *Norma Rae* is not just about a developing personal relationship between a cosmopolitan labor organizer and a somewhat battered but spirited southern woman; its real force comes from its convincing portrayal of how social, class-based determinants shape the characters' conceptual as well as felt experiences. In short, this means that the film illuminates how the dynamics of class culture and class struggle are reproduced through the lives of two individuals. The contours of this dynamic are seen not only in the relationship between Norma Rae and Reuben, but are also explored through the myriad relationship that they each have to their own work, families, histories, and dreams, and the confusing silences that sometimes awkwardly speak to their frustrations and pain.

If we view the concept of class as not only the objective and structural relationship of a group to the means of production, but also as differing sets of lived experiences, social values, cultural

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practices, and affective investments shaped through the prism of everyday life and struggle, we will get a better idea of what *Norma Rae* is actually about. The notion of class can be further elaborated if we think about capital as both a material and ideological commodity, as both economic and symbolic. Following Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital as used here refers to those systems of meanings, understandings, language forms, tastes, and styles that embody specific class interests. Cultural capital points to those combinations of socially inherited and conditioned beliefs and practices that both reproduce as well as challenge existing class (and other dominant) relationships. In other words, each social class has its own contradictory and shifting assemblage of loosely bounded cultural capital, but the dominant classes have the power to foster their own ideas, histories, experiences, and language codes as the most legitimate and valued. For example, the dominant classes not only have the power to distribute goods and services (economic capital), they also use the power to reproduce, through various agencies of socialization and public spheres, forms of cultural capital which legitimate their own power relations while at the same time devaluing the cultural capital of the working class and other groups that present a potential challenge to class domination.

It is within the context of cultural capital that the notion of class becomes concrete, that is, more than a category of political economy. Class now becomes defined, in part, in terms of the received truths and ways of being that characterize different social groups and individuals. Of course, members of the ever-changing and shifting working class are not merely passive receivers of the dominant culture; nor does the existential dimension of language, perception, and style explain their posture toward dominant society. Instead, it is the combination of the existential and the received that gives meaning to the way different social classes view different forms of cultural capital. The power of the dominant culture in all of its diversity is not to be ignored, however, and the way that diverse segments of the working class view its own cultural capital is, in the final analysis, often mediated through the distorted perceptions, representations, meanings, and social relations produced and legitimated by the dominant culture in a wide range of institutions and sites.

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In general, working-class cultural capital is seen as crude, in bad taste, and unsophisticated. This perception represents more than a form of elitism and intellectual confusion; it is a piece of raw ideology that is internalized in all of us. Thus, one might say that the class struggle does not simply exist in the contradictions that we have internalized. In one sense it exists as part of the struggle between one's objective and subjective politics. The most subtle dynamic of class struggle exist in the history that we carry around with us and the delimiting and often unconscious effect it has on how we live and act out our subjective politics, the politics to which we often give lip service. This dimension of the class struggle is strikingly portrayed in the character of Reuben and in his interaction with Norma Rae.

Though Reuben appears to be on the progressive side of the political spectrum, one that sympathizes with an exploited working class, he appears to unconsciously carry with him beliefs and experiences that make him very different from the workers with whom he identifies himself. Some critics have noted that the characterization of Reuben is overdrawn. I don't think that is true if you focus on how the stereotypical images function in the service of illuminating his middle-class cultural capital. Reuben's metaphors and language vividly capture the class difference between himself and Norma Rae. She tells him of her first affair, and describes how she lost her virginity in the back seat of a Cadillac, legs hanging out the window. He counters by telling her that he lost his virginity by being seduced by a music teacher under a painting of a Russian icon. She sleeps with traveling salesmen, until she gets married for the second time, and cavorts with her friends in the local bar. He sleeps with a Harvard lawyer, and reads the *New York Times* with her on Sundays. He sprinkles his speech with words like "*mensch*" and makes reference to Dylan Thomas. At one point in the film, Norma calls him to ask him what to do about a racist leaflet the managers have put on the wall in order to incite the workers against the union drive; he first responds by correcting her grammar.

While Norma Rae becomes a tangible character for us, we can only hear Reuben. Norma Rae isn't intimidated by him, however, and Reuben responds positively to her courage and discipline. While Reuben is handing out leaflets to workers entering the cotton plant,

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Norma Rae passes him and humorously tells him that he is using too many big words. They begin to learn from each other. Most importantly, one sees in the interaction between this southern mill worker and labor organizer a division of labor that has prevented working-class people and middle-class intellectuals from being able either to understand or communicate with each other. Ordinarily one might expect a Reuben type to use his intellectual skills to manipulate the people he is attempting to organize, not an uncommon practice when one assumes that the people are dumb; but it does not happen in this film. Reuben and Norma Rae appear to listen to each other, an important point in the film. One can see in their growing relationship a possible bridging of the incomplete development that exists among both intellectuals and members of the working class, one voiced by Antonio Gramsci when he said, "The popular element 'knows' but does not always feel."<sup>2</sup> Hence not only do we see remnants of the class struggle exposed in this relationship, but we also see it giving way to a more politically progressive social relationship as Norma Rae and Reuben forge a friendship that moves beyond the sexist, exploitative relationships portrayed between men and women in most Hollywood films. The Hollywood formula of sex, power, and intimacy gives way in this film to a dynamic that demonstrates that men and women can be portrayed in ways that challenge the patriarchal formulas that shape most Hollywood movies. This becomes clear in the nonsexual relationship that Reuben and Norma Rae develop. They talk to each other, sleep in the same room on occasion, and even end up swimming nude together; their attraction is brisk, and energy-filled, but it is an attraction mediated by awareness of its own limits. Norma Rae and Reuben realize that the different cultural capital they carry around leaves little possibility for them to forge an intimate sexual affair. Knowing this, they instead develop a relationship that is nonsexist and mutually respectful.

Moreover, the class divisions that exist between Reuben and Norma Rae are played out against the larger struggle between the workers and the cotton plant executives. Within this scenario, neither the plant workers nor the plant managers are painted in bold lifeless stereotypes. Fortunately, the characteristic propensity of many commercial and documentary films to portray workers as either



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unadulterated agents of revolutionary change or social puppets tied to a peculiar brand of despair and self-hatred has not been emulated in this film. For instance, many of the characters are convincingly portrayed against the landscape of both their strengths and weaknesses. Norma Rae's father, for example, is viewed as a kindly heavy drinker, who never takes to either Reuben or Norma Rae's unionizing. Security and degradation are the twin pillars of his life, and he doesn't bat an eyelid about refusing to question either the nature of his own life or the experience of his own labor. The frailty and cultural capital of the workers is captured in scenes which portray them coming late to union meetings because they have been at the local gin mill first, or turning their backs on Reuben because they have received a cutback in their hours and wages because of the union drive. How this group of workers think, act, and organize are realistically tied to their work and the basic forces that shape their daily lives. Their days are spent on the job, providing for themselves and for their families. Their pain, struggles, leisure time, and work are all interrelated and provide both the drawbacks and possibilities for social action.

The interrelatedness of the forces that inform working-class life are brought into high relief in the portrayal of the interconnecting roles and forces that affect Norma Rae's life, particularly in the relationship that she has with her second husband Sonny (Beau Bridges). Sonny is a simple man who is sensitive to his wife's needs but does not understand her growing assertiveness, produced by her emerging political consciousness. Thus Norma Rae's union work and her development as a woman are portrayed against the enduring struggles she has with her husband and family, as well as with her friends and herself. The connection between the personal and the political becomes painfully clear as Norma Rae's husband shakes his head and tells Reuben that she isn't the woman he first married; plaintively, he sighs, "Her head's been turned around." Norma Rae's father appears increasingly to distance himself from her; her friends now meet her and talk to her from a different level of experience than they had in the past; some are hospitable and comradely and some have become enemies, as in the case of the sheriff who drags Norma Rae off to jail for refusing to leave the cotton plant when ordered to by the enraged manager.

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A portrait of how members of the workforce are pitted and manipulate against each other through the division of labor in the mill is vividly illustrated when the plant manager attempts to quiet Norma Rae by giving her a promotion to quality control checker. She takes the promotion because she needs the money, but she slowly discovers that with her new role comes an estrangement from her former friends. She is now perceived as one of the bosses. Her friends shun her and refuse to talk to her. Even her father complains about her pushing him on the job. Workers in this case are not viewed as automatons simply doing their jobs. They know who the enemy is; they simply don't know how to defeat him. The anger and alienation that the workers exhibit appears to be deeply felt by them, but not quite understood. This is captured in a scene in which Reuben calls a house meeting to give the workers an opportunity to voice their criticisms of the plant. Instead of hearing workers polemically ranting about the evils of global oppression, we hear people faltering, hesitating, and finally speaking about issues that are real to them: women not allowed to sit down when they are having menstrual cramps; workers complaining about plant conditions, speedups, and lousy pay. There is a style, rhythm, and quality about these workers that both dignify them and at the same time reveal their limitations.

But in a larger sense, the people who inhabit the film are seen as social actors, not in the cataclysmic sense that one sees in working-class epics such as *1900* but in the undramatic sense that speaks to concrete struggles and real conflict. In one of the more dramatic scenes in the film, Norma Rae is told to leave the plant. She refuses, runs to her work place, scrawls UNION on a placard, and jumps up on a table. Surrounded by managerial thugs, she holds the sign above her head and the choice for the workers around her becomes dramatically clear. One by one, they turn off their switches and bring the oppressive hum of the cotton machinery to a halt. The scene is simple but powerful and important because it brings home the implicit power workers have; it clearly reveals the source of labor and its relationship to the people who run the plant.

The film has been criticized for not fully developing a number of themes. For instance, the complexity of the struggle to unionize the plant is underplayed. Moreover, it is clear that divisions among the

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working class – racial, sexual, ideological, and so forth – are blurred. All of these criticisms are true but marginal. The “silences” of the film do less to impair it than to allow it to focus more strongly on the notion of class struggle itself, a struggle personified in this case in the principle characters of the film, Norma Rae and Reuben. This is not meant to suggest that the union struggle, racial issues, sexism, and other forms of oppression are unimportant; it simply suggests that in this instance the register of class struggle has been emphasized at a moment in American history when labor and working-class people are under siege.

There is much in the film that provides room for distance and critical reflection. Ritt is successful here because he does not clutter the film with too many complex themes. I think he has made a wise decision in weaving in references and connections to other issues while at the same time not trying to give them all equal weight. Moreover, by doing so, subordinating and linking a select few of these themes hierarchically, he has provided an important political message. For instance, Norma Rae’s developing feminism is linked but subordinate to the social class struggle she is engaged in. Thus the film dramatizes an element of causality that is missed in most working-class films, while pointing to the need to make class analysis critically aware of its own omissions. Norma Rae’s feminism, her struggle for independence, is seen as part of a larger social struggle. The struggle for a decent daily existence is linked to overcoming the oppression exercised by the division of labor and power in the plant. The larger issues of global racism and international capitalism linger in the background implied but not explicit. This is a shortcoming but one that does not cancel out the important message or politics of the film.

Beyond the treatment of characters and the portrayal of certain themes, one has to applaud the texture of the script written by Ravetch and Frank, Jr. It sparkles with the rhythm and nuance of working-class dialogue. It is rich, moving, tied to felt experiences, and powerfully supports the concerns of the people it attempts to portray. Moreover, it seems right at home amidst the photography of John A. Alonzo (*Chinatown*). He has photographed this southern mill town in grayish whites and dirt brown tones that convincingly capture an environment filled with a mixture of hope and despair:

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the grimy town motel, the peeling paint on the houses, the life-draining atmosphere of the factory. In addition, the background sound in the film does not celebrate the blues; rather, it makes us feel the deafening hum of machines that seem consciously pitted against the people who run them.

Of course there are limitations in this film. The policing power of the state is played down, the union struggle and final victory appear to come too easily, and there are some sexist references that don't quite sit well with the film's overall politics. In the end, however, *Norma Rae* delivers more than one would expect. It provides an insight into the politics of class struggle at the level of everyday life that is both enriching and convincing. In the last analysis, *Norma Rae* extends the definitions and deepens the complexities of the meaning of working-class struggles and culture in a way that has not been matched by other recent Hollywood films on the working class. For this *Norma Rae* should be seen as a reminder of the potential that films have as a pedagogical resource for engaging important critical issues while expanding our social vision.

### Notes

1. A version of this essay appeared in *Jumpcut* 22 (May, 1980): 1–7.
2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 418.