

# 'Amerika': An Uncertain Trumpet

By Dmitri N. Shalin

Controversy surrounding the ABC television miniseries "Amerika" has generated considerable publicity, mostly negative, still much welcomed by the ratings-hungry producers. It also guaranteed that viewers would come to their TV sets with their prejudices unsharpened.

My own biases were set in motion long before the show. Having lived 20-odd years in a country where the borderline between art and propaganda is deliberately blurred, I have an exceedingly low threshold of tolerance for the ideologically supercharged narrative.

The first few hours of watching America under Soviet domination seemed to confirm my worst expectations. The ruthless police wearing "Darth Vader" helmets; the enemy officials styled after Nazis; the cynical party apparatchiks luxuriating in royal suites provided a curious counterpart to the popular shows about Yankee imperialists I used to watch back home. All I needed to dispose of this blockbuster as a piece of Cold-War propaganda was the message that Godless liberals lost America and that nothing short of bringing prayer back to the school would do if we are to recapture our lost pride.

Oddly enough, the message never came. The authors were in no hurry to furnish a remedy for saving America. Nor were they particularly explicit on who had lost it in the first place. The more I watched, the clearer it became that there was more to this endeavor than good old Russki-bashing.

The thing I found redeeming about the show was that it did not try to reduce messy political realities to a neat formula, to take refuge in the ideologi-

cal verities of the left or the right. A skeptic might dismiss this as ideological hermaphroditism: a nod to liberals, a wink to conservatives — a hodgepodge of tired ideological clichés designed to please everyone. A more apt description of the show's political stance, I believe, is ideological ambivalence.

Ambivalence has not figured prominently in this country's recent political discourse. It was wanting in the Vietnam era, when liberal crusaders knew exactly what was wrong with the world and questioned the motives of those who



questioned their assumptions. It was conspicuous for its absence in the conservative reaction that followed the Vietnam debacle and that produced an overdose of foolproof recipes for bringing America back. While ideological purity was in fashion, ideological ambivalence was in short supply.

Ideological certainty has many virtues: It yields sharp pictures, spares thought and affords clear guidelines for action. It also never fails to do violence to the indeterminacy of the real world. How do you describe the workings of the communist system without reducing Russia to an Evil Empire? How do you

grasp the nature of capitalism without losing sight of its perennial iniquities? This is the problem I face when I try to explain to my students in a class on the Soviet and American societies why I chose the indignities of the free market over the cruelties of the commissars.

What makes "Amerika" stand out among perfectly forgettable TV shows is that its authors dare to be uncertain. It is a welcome sign that such card-carrying liberals as Donald Wrye and Kris Kristofferson would risk their credentials by lending their hand to this ideologically ambivalent project. The fact that the show is criticized from the left and the right suggests that its creators must have done something right.

What, then, is the message "Amerika" offers to Americans? That much as we may abhor ideological ambiguity, we have to learn to live with it; that the time may be ripe for the "conservative left" and the "liberal right" to join forces in making America a more humane society; that the essence of democracy is an open forum in which everyone must have a say; that cultivating democracy is a Sisyphean labor that begins anew the moment it is complete.

Or as John Dewey put it, "Every generation has to accomplish democracy over and over again."

My reservations about the miniseries "Amerika" won't go away. Its preposterous premise, heavy-handed symbolism and familiar Hollywood trappings have received well deserved drubbing. It would be unfortunate, however, if "Amerika"-bashing drowns the sound of this uncertain ideological trumpet.

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