

## Frank Capra & The American Myth

Frank Capra, one of America's most familiar filmmakers emigrated to America from Sicily in May of 1903. He got started in the silent era and came of artistic age in the hey-days of the 1930s, Hollywood's golden age. In February 1934, his success-story begun with the release of 'It happened one night.' The film got positive notices and finally won five major Oscars at the annual event.(1)After this big success a 'Capra film' became a freestanding generic category and a tempting critical target. His more populist films like 'Mr. Deeds goes to town' and 'Mr. Smith goes to Washington' were condemned by a range of reviewers. In particular, the critics condemned the political sermonizing of these films. Still, at the Oscars, Capra received best directing Oscars for 'Mr. Deeds goes to town' and 'You can't take it with you'. However, Capra's failure to garner major Oscars for 'Mr. Smith goes to Washington', 'Meet John Doe' or 'It's a wonderful life' is often taken as evidence of a career in decline, especially because he was expected to score big.(2)

'Mr. Deeds goes to town', is an important film and gives a clear picture of the feelings that became apparent in America in the 1930s. The reason for choosing 'Mr. Deeds goes to town' as a topic for this essay is both difficult and simple. Difficult, because Capra has made so many important films; simple, because 'Mr. Deeds' is one of two films by Capra that I saw ('Mr. Smith goes to Washington' being the other). However, I think 'Mr. Deeds' is just a little less corny and a little more interesting than 'Mr. Smith'. 'Mr. Deeds', marks a turning-point in Capra's relationship to his craft and his public. Though Longfellow Deeds inherits 20 million at the beginning of the film it is a matter of remarkably little interest to him until two-third of the way through the film, when he (and Capra) happen to notice the Depression. This sets Deeds off doing good deeds. Deeds, like Capra, has at last found a purpose serious enough to justify his good fortune(3). Capra explicitly repeats his oft-made claim that with Mr. Deeds he shifted his goals and his methods: "Beginning with 'Mr. Deeds goes to town' my films had to say something. And regardless of the origin of a film-idea-I made it mine". Here, a parallel with the film can be drawn, for the film concludes with the folk poet (Longfellow Deeds) who finally decides to break his silence and 'say something' during the insanity hearing.(4)

The first few years after the Stock Market Crash posed severe challenges to traditional or all-American values and attitudes. The breakdown of the economy shook people's faith in free enterprise, competition, individualism and hard work, all of them being real old-fashioned American ideals. However, the New Deal served to restore some of the confidence many Americans had lost in their government. In addition, the growing power and threat of fascism in Spain, Italy and Nazi Germany became increasingly evident in the thirties. The communist popular front policy of cooperation with anti-Fascist forces led to a large unified group of people working together to oppose fascism.(5) Many Americans thus not only began to feel that the cultural uncertainty fostered by the Depression was dangerous but also due to the rise of fascism that there was a need for defining America's essential principles. The effort to revive American myths and culture was very strong in Hollywood and Frank Capra treated these myths very consciously and skilfully.(6)

Though many have tried to label Capra's social vision (as being Communist or a Capitalist etc.) none have been able to adequately define the main thrust of his social vision. In essence his films of the thirties are strongly shaped by Christian and American values (7). He is a moralist concerned with questions of good and evil and rules of humane conduct. His films defended American ideals and American nationalism. Capra once said that he made a vow to create "films about America and its people, films that would be my way of saying; Thanks America" (8).

In his films of the thirties Capra uses a hero who is an idealist and who defends American political ideas and the Christian idea of 'love thy neighbour.' The hero has a child-like innocence and is placed in a strange environment wherein people scoff at that innocence. The hero, however, is able to articulate and defend these values against the greedy, cynical and spiritually decayed. The heroine is strong, competent and energetic. In the beginning she takes advantage of the hero but gradually converts to his idealistic vision of the world. At the end she supports the hero during his moment of self-doubt. Her declaration of love at a crucial moment in the film gives him the strength he needs to carry on. Placed in a foreign environment, the hero is humiliated by villains and also by the press who make him look foolish in the newspaper. However, this humiliation prepares the hero for the ritual victory in which the hero takes forceful action to overcome his self-doubt affirming the (American) values he believes in and emerges with his social vision intact (9).

In 'Mr. Deeds goes to town' the hero is Longfellow Deeds who inherits twenty million dollar and goes to New York to manage the estate. He is linked to American traditions when he visits Grant's tomb affirming American opportunity and when he quotes Thoreau on the gap between American material and spiritual achievement. His innocence is stressed by his enthusiasm for fire trucks, his conception of love and his inability to understand the city and its people. Babe Benett, the heroine who in the beginning makes fun of Longfellow in newspaper articles, begins to reconsider her cynicism and converts to his idealistic vision of the world. She marshals the support of newsmen and the public when Deeds is accused of insanity because he wants to give away his fortune to unemployed farmers (10). His plan is to give 2000 ten-acre, fully equipped farms to unemployed Depression farmers. However, after he has announced his plan, the lawyers of 'Cedar, Cedar, Cedar and Buddington' have him locked in the County Hospital accused of insanity and Deeds lapses into a battered, heart-torn silence. During the insanity hearing Deeds keeps on being silent. However, when Babe Benett says she loves him and because of pleas by the common people Deeds breaks his silence and explains his position and regains his freedom.

In 'Mr. Deeds goes to town', the problems of unemployment during the Depression are raised by the man who bursts into Deeds' mansion. He is a farmer who berates Deeds for feeding doughnuts to horses while displaced people are starving. Deeds' solution to the essential political problem, provides a good example of Capra's American humanism. The plan has a Jeffersonian ideal to it, creating 2000 yeoman farms. Deeds' plan, which is not imposed by the government, proposes voluntary redistribution of wealth. In doing so, it encourages such traditional American values as individualism, self-help, and voluntary

philanthropy. By looking at it in this way, it looks as if Capra is opposed to the New Deal and to the government helping the poor and unemployed. However, one can also look at the proposal in a different way. Deeds' concern for the poor and his willingness to aid the unemployed parallels the New Deal with its revolutionary program of aiding the poor (11).

All in all, it is difficult to see whether Capra was a supporter of the New Deal or not. It is, however, clear that his films contain examples of the feelings that became apparent in the thirties. Due to the Depression people were in a cultural crisis. To withstand this crisis as well as the totalitarian fascist threat, people (and Capra in his films) began to emphasize important and fundamental American values and norms. With the values and norms the cultural crisis could be solved and America could withstand the fascist ideas by setting good old-fashioned American ideals against it.

By Leon Meskers

**Notes:**

1. Poague L., Another Frank Capra, (Cambridge: 1994), p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 8.
3. Ibid., p. 94.
4. Ibid., p. 95.
5. Maland, C.J., Frank Capra, (New York: 1980), p. 89.
6. Ibid., p. 90.
7. Ibid., p. 91.
8. Ibid., p. 92.
9. Ibid., p. 93/94.
10. Ibid., p. 94/95.
11. Ibid., p. 96/98.