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A New Context for a New American Studies?

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A PRIMARY IMPETUS TO THE AMERICAN STUDIES MOVEMENT AFTER WORLD War II was the effort to escape the narrow focus of the New Criticism in favor of a broader interpretation based upon contextual study. Context seemed to be found in a vague but polysemic definition of culture. Under the rubric of "culture," scholars of America in disciplines as diverse as music, art, literature, and intellectual history believed that they were all studying and thereby constituting a common context in order to move beyond the special interests and methods of their separate fields. By exploring the myths, symbols, and images embedded in texts, tales, and artifacts, those scholars thought they exposed the "masked" and other deep patterns underlying American culture. Those covert foundations revealed the ambivalences, ironies, and paradoxes of the American mind whether found in the dream of the self-made man, classic and later individualism, industrialism and agrarianism, the Brooklyn Bridge and the American Adam.¹

Today's American Studies scholarship repudiates most of the cultural and political premises of the myth-symbol-image school; less clear is how far current approaches to context supersede past practices. New subject matter and new terminology would seem to indicate at first reading a new approach to American Studies, if not a new American Studies. The concern with myths,

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symbols, and images, which marked the classical period of American Studies, has given way to an overwhelming interest in class, ethnicity, race, and gender.² Such once popular terms as *paradox*, *ambiguity*, and *irony* have been replaced by *domination*, *hegemony*, and *empowerment*. The definition of culture has changed from one stressing eclecticism but unity to one emphasizing division and opposition. The exemplary works have moved from stressing the basic homogeneity of the American mind and uniformity of the American character to noting the diversity of the American population and divisiveness of the American experience.³ As a result, the idea of society as a system of structured inequality receives priority over the concept of culture as the basis for understanding American life.⁴

Do new vocabularies and new subject matter also betoken new ways of conceiving of context in American Studies? Or, does what appears like a new phase of American Studies continue to rely upon old ways of contextualization? Have the larger intellectual trends of the last few decades significantly altered how scholars in American Studies conceive of context and how they go about contextualizing their subject matter in their own texts? Should we speak in the end, therefore, of a New American Studies or only of a new phase of American Studies?

If the disparate interests that comprise American Studies are united about anything, it is the necessity of contextual knowledge. There are many ways of providing context and therefore many meanings of that much used, and abused, word.⁵ At one pole are the presuppositions of a basic, or "simple" contextualism, or what we might call "contextual fundamentalism" in analogy to religious faith. Two clusters of basic postulates characterize such an approach.

At the heart of contextual fundamentalism is the premise that documents, artifacts, or texts are basically self-interpreting without recourse to any explicit framework. As practice, such an approach acts as if the text's words or the artifact's existence were determinative, that is conceptually coercive, of the "reading" they are to receive—regardless of the reader's values, politics, interpretive paradigm, or interpretive community. Thus "facts" are discovered, not created or constituted by the frameworks that enable their existence. While such an approach seems most obvious in some earlier material culture studies where the presence of the artifact was presumed to determine its interpretation,⁶ an analogous approach to the uses of literary texts, especially by historians, "guts" the texts for propositions about ideas and behaviors, past and present.⁷ Its parallel is also found in the naive premise of those accepting documents at their face value as proving, that is, telling, a story to which they are already committed.⁸ In practice such contextual fundamentalism frequently comes down to the quest for one meaning—usually read as authorial intention in text, document, or even artifact—as a way of curtailing

a multiplicity of interpretations being read as multiple realities.⁹

The documentary or artifactual analysis so fundamental to a simple contextualism assumes a second premise about history as the ultimate context. Normal historical practice rests upon a matrix of assumptions about the essential narratability of the past. Such an approach to contextualism postulates at bottom that a historical narrative is verified in its essential structure by its parallel in past reality. In the end the variant versions or interpretations could—and should—be reconciled as constituting a single (hi)story from a single viewpoint of presentation told by a single voice. This understanding of the past as the “Great Story”¹⁰ presumes that all the various documents and artifacts can—and should—be “woven” into some sort of overall story.

Classic American Studies questioned the simple link between texts and social reality; now a second major thrust in this direction is being mounted by contemporary American Studies. Classic American Studies challenged the first cluster of premises of contextual fundamentalism by transmuting what historians and other scholars had considered past reality into myths and images. What had been described as the history, and therefore the “reality” of the frontier or self-made man, for example, became myth or image—or ideology in modern parlance,¹¹ and therefore a different kind of “reality.” As Henry Nash Smith first explained his use of “myth” and “symbol,”

I use the words to designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image I do not mean to raise the question whether such products of the imagination accurately reflect empirical fact. They exist on a different plane. But as I have tried to show, they sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs.¹²

The transition from Progressive to Consensus or counter-Progressive historiography mirrored not only the cold war era¹³ but also the questioning of a simple link between language and texts and the construction of reality, and so it also challenged any simple understanding of context.¹⁴

Now a second, more fundamental challenge to the understanding of context as social reality is apparent in the call for a new approach to American Studies. This challenge arises from efforts to incorporate the new continental scholarship in the human sciences, especially as absorbed through literary theory in the past few decades. It not only denies all documentary and artifactual fundamentalism but also rejects the second premise of the Great Story as nothing but another social and cultural construction.

Some indication of what premises such a new approach entails can be found in the summary by Sacvan Bercovitch of the “similar convictions about the problematics of literary history” shared by his collaborators in *Reconstructing American Literary History*:

that race, class, and gender are formal principles of art, and therefore integral to textual analysis; that language has the capacity to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structures it seems to reflect; that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation; that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past; that the task of literary historians is not just to show how art transcends culture, but also to identify and explore the ideological limits of their time, and then to bring these to bear upon literary analysis in such a way as to make use of the categories of culture, rather than being used by them.¹⁵

He proposes this set of propositions as resolving old and new problems alike. First, the problematic avoids the older shortcomings of both “the narrow textuality of the New Criticism” and the “naiveté of the old historicism as ‘background’ or ‘context.’” Second, the problematic attempts to steer a middle course among the conflicting implications of the several new currents in literary theory and the incompatible basic premises underlying the varieties of new scholarship.¹⁶ Third, the problematic seeks a reflexive understanding and fusion—some would say confusion—of text and context as applied to scholars’ own textualization of context and, perhaps, to the scholarly context as well.

Whether and why this proposed set of propositions might resolve new and old problems alike for a new American Studies depends upon how one looks at the new scholarship and theory. Even where the middle of the road lies depends upon how the width of the road is conceived, and the issue of the width is at the center of the contest over problematics. To show the possible pathways such a middle course hopes to follow, we must therefore consider the edges, so-to-speak, of the conceptual highway. If simple contextualism lies at one edge of the road, then what is popularly referred to as deconstruction or the linguistic turn lies at the opposite edge.

Without tracing—some would say creating—the history of recent scholarship or disciplinary politics in the human sciences, I hope to show that some of the major implications—others might argue achievements—of this scholarship subvert not only the basic premises of contextual fundamentalism but also challenge new theories of representation and social production associated with the new cultural studies. The attempt to find a single methodology for the new cultural studies founders upon the diversity of approaches to contextualism.¹⁷

The implications of so-called grand theory in the human sciences revolve about and culminate in the current tendencies to denaturalization, demystification, deconstruction and, if I may coin some words to continue the alliteration and rhyme, dehierarchization and dereferentialization so evident in so much humanistic scholarship today. Some of these trends focus on, and result from, contemporary concerns with race, ethnicity, class, and gender. But the implications spread far beyond these categories to the foundations assumed fundamental to all fields of human study because these implications

challenge our ways of understanding what we are about as scholars and people and how we represent our understandings.¹⁸ In the end, these trends question any easy separation of texts from contexts and vice versa, any easy division of politics from methodology.

The clearest, and perhaps most widely accepted, trend is the denaturalization of race, ethnicity, and sex. Much of what previous generations of scholars ascribed to the effects of biology in the understanding of racial and ethnic differences among peoples, and the sexual differences between men and women, recent scholars attribute to social and cultural arrangements. Thus so much of what was once explained by inevitable natural distinctions is now explained by theories of social construction.¹⁹ The biology of race, ethnicity, and sex, in short, has become the culture or ideology of racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. Even the conception of human nature as a uniform biological grounding for all human behavior has been denied in favor of a highly changeable, plastic conception of human conception.²⁰ What distinguishes recent denaturalization from the anti-racism and the rise of the culture concept after World War II is how thorough the penetration of culture has been into areas hitherto considered natural; so thorough that the priority of the nature/culture dichotomy has been reversed in the human sciences, and culture has become the privileged explanation of human behavior more than ever before.²¹

Accompanying and reinforcing this trend is one we might call demystification which traced human behavior, texts, and artifacts to their social production or class origins. At its core such an approach postulates social relationships as systems of structured inequality. Presumption of such structured inequalities in a society transforms groups into class(es), sexes into gender systems and peoples into racial systems. To tie literature, the arts, and nonfiction to class and political power turns ideas into ideologies and texts into discourses.²² The revival of class analysis in literary, historical, and other scholarships results in the renewed emphasis on ideology and the prevalence of such terms as *hegemony* and *domination* in academic texts and discourse. Even the conception of human nature as the universal biological foundation of all human behavior is portrayed as nothing more than a rationale for bourgeois hegemony and a liberal economy. As Roland Barthes argued long ago: "The status of the bourgeoisie is particular, historical: man as represented by it is universal, eternal."²³

The difference between the problematics of earlier and recent American Studies in regard to denaturalization and demystification is illustrated dramatically by the explicit themes as well as the underlying presuppositions of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* as opposed to Alan Trachtenberg's *Incorporation of America*. Race and gender play almost no role in Smith's exposition of western imagery, while they receive much more attention in Trachtenberg's interpretation of the relationship between late nineteenth-century culture and

social relations. Although Smith implies some class divisions among those who held differing images of the frontier, he rarely mentions them explicitly. Such division seems repressed in his analysis in favor of a generalized or unified model of cultural imagery held in common by all, or at least most, Americans. Trachtenberg, on the other hand, separates the official culture from the oppositional culture generated by those who were subordinated during the emergence of the new "incorporated" society. Trachtenberg argues in the end that the official culture of Americans was hegemonic because it divided production from consumption and presented spectacle and mere appearance as reality in order to hide the genuine conflicting interests among American citizens, who were increasingly being absorbed into a corporate society. Such official culture confused, and thereby repressed, opposition to the emerging way of life. In the end, no matter how the two authors might differ on uses of denaturalization of race and gender or the demystification of social origins in their books, they seem equally sure of how to textualize the differing realities they presume at the base of American culture.²⁴

Still another clear tendency in recent theory is one I shall label dehierarchization. Such a trend is most evident in the erosion, even dissolution, of the scholarly and aesthetic boundaries dividing elite from popular cultures. Although it may be difficult to pinpoint when the Beatles became as legitimate to study as Beethoven, or *The Virginian* as *Moby-Dick*, or everyday objects as high art ones, American Studies was in its classic period already a leader in the trend.²⁵ With the erosion of the boundaries between popular and elite cultures, the criteria sustaining the canons in literature, art, and music were also called into question. If Russian formalism made folktales a model for all narrative, then semiotic, structuralist, and poststructuralist methodologies further homogenized the distinction between the study of elite and popular forms.²⁶

Culture with a capital C became just another part of culture with a small c, but that "reduction"—some would say degradation—rested upon certain ways of understanding texts as context and contexts as texts and had political as well as cognitive and aesthetic implications. Repudiation of the criteria distinguishing elite from popular, folk, and other cultures rested upon a denial of transcendental or universal principles or values in the evaluation of literature, art, and music and the relativization of aesthetic standards in general. When judgments of taste, form, and pleasure are demystified, they are connected to the specific social location of an observer, to a specific interpretive community in a society. Once again cultural and social arrangements circum(in)scribed what had been previously presumed transcultural.

Much of the new historicization in the humanities, particularly in the new cultural studies, seems devoted to the demystification of abstract terms, subjects, or categories long considered basic to our culture, hence universal to

culture and therefore fundamental to the humanities themselves. As Richard Johnson says:

I would describe the evolving agenda [of cultural studies] as a series of critiques of innocent-sounding categories or innocent-sounding practices . . . obviously culture and art and literature, but also communication, and consumption, entertainment, education, leisure, style, the family, femininity, and masculinity, and sexuality and pleasure, and, of course, the most objective sounding categories of all, knowledge and science.²⁷

The study of how such concepts or categories emerged reveals how they became reified as abstract concepts and mystified as essential and universal categories and thus exposes their political uses. In the end, such demystification creates a story of how a presumably shared culture, eclectic in both its contents and the class of its audiences, was transformed into categories of culture segregated by class. This is the history summarized in the title of Lawrence Levine's new book: *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.²⁸

The new cultural studies seek to fuse cultural and political critique in practice through contextualization.²⁹ The aim of combining cultural and political critique is not new but its current vitality represents a new phase in American Studies. If to demystify the class origins of ideas transmutes them into ideologies, however, then do cultural and social arrangements also determine or circumscribe their own theorization? Such is the reflexive dilemma of the sociology of knowledge as Karl Mannheim noted long ago.³⁰ Should the study of how ideas arose in the past also reveal the scholar's own political uses of denaturalization, demystification, and de-essentializing in the present? Does—must—the reflexive critique of culture lead to the questioning of its own premises of contextualization as ideology and politics? Must—should?—the social construction of cultural reality give way to the cultural or textual construction of social reality?

Dehierarchicalization culminates in challenging the whole idea of privileging some foundational assumptions over others for the grounding of judgments, be they conceptual or aesthetic. In the realm of ideas, it is anti-essentialist, hence anti-foundationalist.³¹ In aesthetics, it is anti-universalist, anti-elitist, even anti-aestheticist in a sense. It denies the traditional distinction between literary and other forms of languages and impugns theories as metalanguages serving as mediation.³² The questioning of all essentialism as a form of unwarranted privileging implies that conceptual and aesthetic judgments are as much politics as philosophy. As Barthes said, "The disease of thinking in essences . . . is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man."³³

The dehierarchicalization of language eventuates in what I shall call dereferentialization and ultimately in deconstruction. My use of a coined term deref-

erentialization (or perhaps dereferentialism) is only meant to suggest that among the recent trends in the human sciences is one questioning the extra-linguistic "reality" as well as essentialism of abstract concepts. The denial of representation as realism challenges referentialism not only in literature and the arts but especially in history and the social sciences.³⁴ Not only are such categories as race, ethnicity, and gender thereby transformed into cultural constructions, but even such other conceptions as class and the state are categorized as essentialist and foundational if they are not construed as culturally arbitrary because they are historically specific.³⁵

In the end, transforming the social construction of concepts into culturally construed categories reduces all modes of human communication to forms of representation. When dereferentialization questions what is the real status of the subject or object, it also questions the nature of the entities that go into constructing a context. Such obscuring, if not denying, of the referentiality of the subject therefore undermines the legitimacy and authority of all contextualism, particularly that traditional to history.³⁶

Deconstruction—whether defined in the European or American manner—is the ultimate de-hierarchicalization of language, for it treats texts and discourses as nondeterminative of their ostensible meaning. Ultimately the suspicion of language as subversive of its own meaning allows the de(con)struction of a text through freewheeling critical interpretation in which the critic supplements the voids and pursues the duplicities of the text's language far beyond its apparent significations.³⁷ While deconstruction subverts attempts at totalization, it also undermines efforts at mediation between texts and "reality," especially if that reality is presumed socially rather than textually constructed. Men and women may make their worlds, their world views, and their words, but can they make the connections among them in ways that can be comprehended according to their own theories of language?³⁸

Given the difficulties of uniting a signifier with its signified, let alone any referent in post-Saussurian theorizing, many commentators see the larger implications of deconstruction as ending in conceptual relativism, intellectual if not social anarchy, and philosophical and political nihilism. In other words, this other side of the conceptual road is too far out for many scholars supporting contextualism. As one historian reviewing the implications of the "linguistic turn" for all understanding warns:

If we take them [those of a strong linguistic turn] seriously, we must recognize that we have no access, even potentially, to the unmediated world of objective things and processes that might serve to ground and limit claims to knowledge of nature or to any transhistorical or transcendent subjectivity that might ground our interpretation of meaning. Knowledge and meaning are not discoveries but constructions. The world and the subject that confronts it are "always already" present to us as culturally

constructed. This perspective (and one may call it "grand" in its sweeping reformulation of the way we live ourselves and our worlds) has a number of significant implications. It is radically historicist in the sense that all knowledge is time-bound and culture-bound, but it also undermines the traditional historians' quest for unity, continuity, and purpose by robbing them of any standpoint from which a relationship between past, present, and future could be objectively reconstructed. By conceiving of knowledge as a form of action, as creation, domination, or communicative engagement, moreover, this perspective implicates all forms of knowing in the social and political practices of a specific sociocultural formation. Finally, the new *grand* theory tends to dissolve the analytical distinctions between, and hierarchical ordering of, different modes of knowing and the disciplines connected to them.³⁹

Scholars trying to bound the free play of interpretations, forestall the collapse of cultural pluralism into conceptual relativism, and legitimate traditional historical practices must rest their case on denying the more radical conceptual implications of the "linguistic turn" for a form of realism that allows a mild pluralism without various sceptical relativisms. Such a realism must predicate not only the existence of a past as actuality independent of the would-be interpreter but also assume that accounts of the past represent it as it was. The validity of these accounts, moreover, must be measured by correspondence with that presumed actuality. Such an approach to realism seems to keep the conceptual road both narrower and safer than language theorists would advocate or allow.⁴⁰

At the heart of the controversy over realism in contextual practice is the relation between a traditional construction of the past grounded mainly on referentiality as opposed to a construction seen primarily as another form of representation. If contextualists, even of the new sort, do not hold to their traditional claims to the primacy of experience over meaning, to context over text, to reference over representation, then how can they assert the "truth" in both their social ontology and their politics? Thus the "linguistic turn" with its reversal of what was traditionally privileged in the relations between meaning/experience, representation/reference, text/context seems as political as it is conceptual. The politics of contextualism, like its epistemology, are framed in terms of a philosophy postulating realism, because the very foundations—the "common sense"—of the disciplines relied on privileging the "real" world over (that is, as grounding) the assertions about it.⁴¹

In the end, incompatible premises and methodologies in the human sciences pose major problems of mediation between text and context, between textualism and contextualism as ways of understanding the past. As a consequence of this conceptual conflict there are also contests within and between disciplines. The dilemmas of the underlying and opposing problematics can be focused if we examine three different definitions of context which resemble older arguments over text and context but rest upon recent intellectual trends and theories from abroad.

1) context. In the first definition, context reduces to the verbal fabric itself

in a text and therefore contextual understanding is derived solely from the text by the reader, whether inscribed there by an author according to some intentional model of communications or constructed by the reader in some reader-response model.⁴² Such an approach to context represents the “linguistic turn” in its strong version. In an approach modeled upon Saussurian linguistics, meaning derives from its linguistic context. Critics charge such an approach to meaning resembles tautology because, in the end, the signified is reduced to the signifier. As one scholar phrases this critique: “The system of linguistic signs becomes a self-contained, endless, internal self-referential system of signifiers, whose meanings are generated by their own network.”⁴³ Such seeming (linguistic) solipsism appears to lead only to a useless scepticism or an unacceptable idealism in the eyes of its critics. This definition of context contradicts the traditional understanding of context because it depends upon evidence or analysis internal rather than external to the text. In consequence its opponents might label this textual fundamentalism in contrast to its contextual opposite.⁴⁴

Many scholars see the New Criticism as preparing the way for later textualist approaches in the United States. Thus they often accuse deconstructive criticism, like its predecessor, of focusing exclusively on the text to derive its meaning and denying the value of context in interpreting a text.⁴⁵ Unlike the earlier New Critics, however, many of the strong textualists extended the premises of their approach to the very understanding of life as a text. Not only does human behavior and social interaction from this view produce texts, but humans and their societies can only be understood as textualizations they produce about themselves. All behavior is interpreted like texts because it is only interpreted through texts.⁴⁶

2) context₂. In the second definition, the context of a text comes from, or is constructed from, other texts. This approach may be called “intertextuality” in one sense of that word.⁴⁷ Once again, this definition is considered a product of structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language and textuality. Thus its critics see context₂ as only slightly less self-referential and solipsistic than context₁, for the interpretation of context₂ is still within the closed conceptual realm postulated by the “linguistic turn.” For that reason, we could call both contexts₁ and ₂ textualist in their problematics and their methodologies. The basic methodology rests upon some version of narrative theory or other form of poetic, discursive, rhetorical, or stylistic analysis. Social reality appears both to be constituted and understood through forms of signifying practices broadly conceived. Such an approach to context leads to understanding the human sciences as poetics or rhetoric.

The earlier formalist analyses by Henry Glassie of folkhousing in eighteenth-century middle Virginia and Will Wright of the western movie both juxtapose precise formalist analysis of their “texts” with vaguer attributions of historical

social structure derived according to a more traditional contextualism.⁴⁸ In other words, like so many cultural studies, the authors use a meticulous formal analysis on the cultural texts they explore but not on the social “texts” they accept as givens. They, in the terminology of this argument, present their main analyses in terms of contexts₁ and ₂ but embed them in a presumably transparent history constructed as context₃. Werner Sollors’s recent book, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*,⁴⁹ presents a more complete example of contexts₁ and ₂ than these earlier works, because it treats the history of ethnicity like the understanding of ethnicity itself as subject to, and derivative of, rhetorical and other textualist forms of analysis. Contexts₁ and ₂ result in understanding the past as *a* history, because it is always a textualization, that is, always *a* construction, never a reconstruction as such.

3) context₃. In this third definition, the context of a text is found in the extra-textual(ist) world. This approach breaks out of the circularity of the textualist definition of context, whether linguistic or even hermeneutic, in the opinion of its proponents. We might label this approach as properly contextualist, for this is the usual definition of context as employed in the normal contextualist practice of literature, music, and art scholars as well as historians and social scientists. In practice, context₃ receives a variety of definitions depending upon methods of contextualization, but the fundamental premise of each rests upon a form of realism that posits the conceptually coercive structure of the extratextualized world. Today this contextualization is usually some version of the social construction of reality. The stronger the version of social construction, the more likely the past is interpreted as traditional history and the more it is considered a *reconstruction* of past reality according to the ideal of the “Great Story.”

If we take Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*,⁵⁰ and Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*,⁵¹ as examples of a new generation of cultural studies, then their formal analysis of textual structure rests upon a contextualist₃ approach to the social system said to generate the novels and their reception. Both authors divide their books into a first third expositing a history of the larger social context of the publication of novels and their readers and the remaining two-thirds examining the themes and formulas of the novels as understood and used by their readers. Although both authors are well aware of textualist challenges to traditional contextualizing of past realities, they, like those they accuse of fostering a hegemonic canon and history, resort to a transparently unambiguous social and cultural history as the matrix of their own versions of past context.⁵² If Davidson in her afterword, “Texts as Histories,” argues against universalism as a basis for textualizing the past, she also assures her reader she is against relativism as a way of coding history.

Opponents of context₃ as an approach ask how the world can be described in light of the challenges raised to any textualization by the “linguistic turn.” How can contextualists₃ resolve the dilemmas of representation without masking (mystifying) what they do through reification in—and of—their constructions? Do not all contexts₃ reduce in actual practice as well as in theory into contexts₁ or ₂? Cannot the methodologies of context₃ be studied as rhetoric or poetics or narrative, so that the *practice*, if not the presumptions, of context₃ is just like that of contexts₁ and ₂?

Contested, even contradictory, definitions of key vocabulary reveal opposing problematics for they postulate—and therefore constitute?—relationships among language, behavior, and social reality and even the nature of the state with its relations of power and domination.⁵³ Contested methods result from opposing methodologies which in turn depend upon contradictory frameworks about texts and their relation to contexts. In turn contested methodologies and contradictory problematics provide the focus and the medium for the political contests over, and for, the control of meaning in a discipline, between disciplines, and beyond them.

Therefore defining text and context in a discipline is intertwined with contentions within the disciplines itself considered as context. The basic issue for those supporting the strong contextualist position seems to revolve around the relation postulated between power and knowledge, while for those advocating the strong textualist approach the issue at bottom seems to depend upon the relation between language and the world. Hence the opposing sides taken by the two camps on the possibility of distinguishing between signified and referent, text and discourse, meaning and experience, cultural constitution and social construction of reality. The perspectivalism of the textualists leads in the eyes of their opponents to self-defeating relativisms which vitiate any secure foundations for either political critique or explanatory and interpretive security. The theory and the politics of the contextualists appear to produce naught but more texts or ideology to the textualists. Strong textualists tend to treat contextual reality and the politics of power as poetics or rhetoric, since all such approaches must be produced as another text. Strong contextualists question the politics of a textualism that denies the effects of power and the social construction of the world in which we feel we experience our lives as real beyond mere language. So methodological stands upon the use of poetics or politics in explicating texts and contexts in the human sciences leads inevitably to a reflexive poetics and politics of the human sciences themselves as texts and contexts.⁵⁴

From the viewpoint of a strong textualism, contextualization demands some kind of poetic analysis, so let the phrase “poetics of context” remind us of the basic premise. How is the nature and unity of the subject/object constructed? What narrative, rhetorical, and other devices or structures enable descriptions of context to have the forms they do? Once the conception of an

overall poetics of context is generated, then it is easy to conceive of a poetics of ethnicity,⁵⁵ a poetics of race,⁵⁶ a poetics of gender,⁵⁷ or a poetics of class⁵⁸ or even of a poetics of society,⁵⁹ a poetics of culture,⁶⁰ and a poetics of history.⁶¹ In all cases the seeming arbitrariness of texts as constructions might lead to a politics of will and desire.⁶²

On the other hand, the politicization of texts and contexts results from a strong social constructionist position applied to texts and contexts and to the human sciences themselves. The politics of texts embraces such questions as: Why look at contexts as poetics rather than politics? Whose poetics and whose ideology is employed and why? As one scholarly wit summarizes the basic issue: the politics of texts asks not "is there a text in this class?" but rather "is there class in this text?"⁶³ What are the politics of communications theory?⁶⁴ Why, in short, mystify the "power" of language as determinant or constitutive of social reality, and whose collective interests does such a mystification serve?

The politics of texts and contexts results in the definition of politics itself being contested. If politics might be defined as contests for control of the structures of meaning whether in a discipline, in a society, or in the world,⁶⁵ then textualists and contextualists can argue over the ambiguity of both of the major words in the phrase "structures of meaning." A textualist asks: how is meaning structured in a poststructuralist, post-Marxist world? A contextualist inquires: who controls the social structure determining meaning? Even this definition of politics, therefore, takes a stance on the issues, for it too revolves around the power/knowledge dilemma. Any understanding of context necessitates contested canons, contested histories as part of the political contests over both the nature of social reality and the ways of understanding it in American Studies. To treat the human sciences only as ways of understanding, however, subverts both them and politics in the view of most strong social constructionists. If, as Louis Althusser remarked, "philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory,"⁶⁶ only a philosophy of realism justifies ideals as politics and the human sciences as praxis.⁶⁷ But is modern realism part of bourgeois ideology, when the mystified universal essentialist definition is traced to its class origins?⁶⁸

The problem of synthesizing American history reveals the politics *of* and *in* our field. The very search for a new synthesis in United States history results from the success of revisionist efforts to incorporate the implications of new presumptions and their "facts" about race, ethnicity, gender, and class for constructing the American past. The result of such re-envisioning of the American past fragmented, or pluralized, its comprehension as a unified subject told as single story from a single voice or viewpoint. For political as much as for conceptual reasons demands arose for a synthetic key or "master interpretive code"⁶⁹ that would offer a new, more comprehensive unity beyond

the plurality of partial histories of particular groups hidden by a previously unified but hegemonic history.

A recent debate over synthesis in the *Journal of American History* focused on the evolution of a public realm in United States history as a synthetic key to bring conceptual unity to the field and therefore to the story. Thomas Bender suggested that the making of an American public culture, or the changing formations of a public arena resulting from the clash of classes and the interaction of groups, provided the basis in past social reality for a new synthesis.⁷⁰ Although Bender allowed for contending groups and ideologies, his critics still accused him of subscribing to an image of society and power based upon the theory and politics of liberal pluralism. As a result one critic complained that Bender's model was just another history told from the top down which would continue to marginalize the victims of hegemonic history.⁷¹ All suggested by inference the replacement of Bender's competitive but still pluralistic model of politics by a more thorough conflict model of society and politics that not only created central and peripheral groupings in the past but also their history in the present.⁷² Thus this proposed synthesis was as political as its focus. (All the scholars presumed context, as the foundation of their historical and political practices.)⁷³

This call for synthesis therefore did not resolve the crisis of history because it too became yet another contest over methodology and politics. What or whose form is the synthesis to take? Whose voice and viewpoint should prevail in the Great Story and partial stories, including what political message and how to code it?⁷⁴ Who, in short, should be the Great Storyteller and what should be the message? The plea for a synthesis must therefore be seen as both a political act and a judgment on contextualism versus textualism. Is any history as overall context naught but an ideology therefore from both a strong contextualist and a strong textualist viewpoint?

The clash of interpretive principles and therefore communities—or vice versa—in the opposing approaches to context shows the lack of agreement among the players and their problematics on the very nature of what constitutes the game, so-to-speak, let alone what are the rules of the game, which games are to be played, by whose or what rules, and what or whose plays count.⁷⁵ If the answers come from how to decide or who or what decides, then the answers must be sought in the politics within and of a profession. At least that would seem to account for the recent popularity of the histories of professional discourse, especially in literary criticism and literary theory.⁷⁶ But how these histories should be constructed or plotted raises the very specter they were meant to dispel: what or whose definition of context should prevail in these histories of context?

If politics within and of a discipline like those in the larger world equals the contest for control of the structures of meaning, then how resolve the

ambiguities of the words "meaning" and "structure" when they are at the heart of the controversy between the textualists and the contextualists? The questions that identify the camps and their loyalties seem patent. (1) Why do things take the form they do? marks a textualist. (2) Why do the forms arise when they do? distinguishes a contextualist. Of course, both camps answer both questions in their own way. One can answer, mediate, reduce these questions by conceptual and/or political choices but the answers like the questions remain grounded by textualist or contextualist postulates about words, world views, and worlds.

Has the New American Studies found a methodology that will ground both its intellectual and political practices and still avoid the dilemmas of contemporary contextualism and textualism, especially the "narrow textuality" and the "old historicism as 'background' or 'context' "? At the same time as old ways of construing the past as history are challenged by the new intellectual and political trends as a way of providing overall context, there is a call for a new historicism or historicization to mediate the differing approaches to context and thereby steer a middle course among the pitfalls opened by modern theory.

The energetic role proposed for a new kind of history is part of an effort to escape from the dilemmas of the human sciences, particularly as inscribed in literary theory.⁷⁷ In order to escape the scepticism produced by the free play of interpretations and also the privileging of reified concepts and categories through essentialism, scholars look to the history of the cultural construction of these categories and their signifieds.⁷⁸ In this way many of these scholars hope to secure a foundation for their epistemologies as well as their politics. Such new historicization seeks to avoid the problems of poststructuralist, post-Marxist, posthistorical textualist criticism of contextualism at the same time as it uses its results to provide a new, more reflexive context for contextualization without the problems of the old.

The new trend to historicization in American Studies seeks a construction of the United States past that would provide a firm foundation to constrain the free play of interpretations while at the same time being sensitive to the problems of representation and textualization that form so important a part of the new trends. If simple contextualism presumed that the construction of history is transparent to its supposed referent, universal or omniscient in viewpoint, and self-evidently "realistic" in narrative construction, the new trend to historicization tries to reconcile the dilemmas introduced by the incompatible premises of demystification through social production and deconstruction through dereferentialization.

But what can Fredric Jameson's advice to "always historicize," that is, to always contextualize, mean in this postmodern period? His own dilemmas of interpretation reveal all too well the problems for one who would be a con-

textualist but who sees the claims of textualism in a post-Marxist, poststructuralist, posthistoricist world.⁷⁹ Surely the effort must advance beyond the recent flood of new but normal histories of methodologies, disciplines, and schools of criticism, if it is to serve as the new contextualism. It must at least mediate between—if not proceed beyond—textualism and contextualism as versions of context, between poetics and politics as textual versions of social reality. It cannot accept and base its narrative upon a transparent social history as normally written for grounding its own analysis of the social production and consumption of texts through demystification. It cannot rehierarchize or re-essentialize some basic social and cultural categories as it poeticizes the contextualization of other concepts and categories. It cannot move the marginal peoples to the center of the story in the guise of the other but still resort to the traditional paradigm of the past as the Great Story. Lastly, it ought not pretend to a middle way, if it narrows the road to achieve that path.

These many problems bring us back to Bercovitch's proposed resolution through a new problematic for the historicization of cultural studies. To repeat his statement:

[T]hat race, class, and gender are formal principles of art, and therefore integral to textual analysis; that language has the capacity to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structures it seems to reflect; that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation; that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past; that the task of literary historians is not just to show how art transcends culture, but also to identify and explore the ideological limits of their time, and then to bring these to bear upon literary analysis in such a way as to make use of the categories of culture, rather than be used by them.

With the change of a few words specific to literary history could this statement constitute the methodological call, if not program, for a new American Studies?

Using this problematic as a basis, can American Studies now abandon at long last the *methodenschmerz* expressed so poignantly in that old, plaintive question about whether the field has a method? I believe that American Studies students are trying like other scholars today to achieve a new intellectual security in the face of the scepticism bequeathed to us by grand theory in the human sciences. This quest for a postscepticism in a postmodern world can only be understood as a hope for a new realism based upon cultural pluralism without lapsing into any extreme conceptual relativisms. The move from the seeming consensus of liberal politics in and of the myth-and-symbol-image school⁸⁰ to the conflict model underlying as well as justifying so much of the would-be, new contextualism still rests upon a social construction view of reality. A conflict model of society and politics grounds the mediation of the three versions of context in most of new cultural studies methodology. Thus

many of the new would-be contextualists favor a normal historicization in a world they consider deconstructed or decentered rather than a new kind of deconstructed historicism as a contextualization of that world.⁸¹

While a consensus appears to exist in the new cultural studies on the advantages of using a conflict model in the field, disagreement still prevails over the new contextualism itself, on applying a conflict model to texts and the textualization of their contexts. Both Jean-Christophe Agnew in his *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750*,⁸² and Walter Benn Michaels in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*,⁸³ would seem to be contributing to the same larger narrative of the parallel rise of capitalism and the transformation of people's self-conscious understanding of themselves and the world they make. Their own texts, however, disagree on how to represent these representations in their relation to their contexts. The issue dividing their own texts is their position on the relations between textualism and contextualism in the present and therefore in the construction of the past.

Historian Agnew takes as his chief theme "the complex and mutually illuminating relation between the two ideas [of play(s) and market]—between the practical liquidity of the commodity form and the imaginative liquidity of the theatrical form" (xiii). He argues that "commerciality and theatricality are inescapably dialectical ideas—labile, reflexive, deconstructive—and like the practices of which they are abstracted properties" (xiii). In spite of this seeming espousal of reflexive deconstruction, Agnew, in his own representation of the spectacles of the market and the theater, assumes the pose of the grand spectator, that is, the Great Storyteller, with one voice, viewpoint, and story that counteracts the reflexivity, let alone the deconstruction of the supposed dialectic between work and play(s), capitalism and culture. In other words, he seems to construe contexts₁ and ₂ almost solely as context₃ without worrying about the textualizing of his own account of texts and contexts.

Literary critic Michaels seems to agree with Agnew's approach when he argues about the relation between texts and their context in relation to naturalism:

. . . the only relation literature as such has to culture as such is that it is part of it. If I speak of the logic of naturalism, it is not to identify a specific ideological function of literature and the real. I want instead to map out the reality in which a certain literature finds its place and to identify a set of interests and activities that might be said to have as their common denominator a concern with double identities that seem, in naturalism, to be required if they are to be identities at all. (27)

But Michaels brings more of a textualist sensitivity to his own essays as well as to past texts and therefore gives them a more problematical relationship to the contexts he constructs for them. For example, some sense of this difference can be seen in his explication of the logic of naturalism:

Why does the miser save? He saves to escape the money economy; he saves to reenact for himself the origin of the economy. How can metal become money? How can paint become a picture? One set of answers to these questions repeats the escape from money: metals never did become money; they always were; hence they never are; a picture is just paper pretending to be something else. The logic of these answers is the logic of the goldbugs and Bryanites, *trompe l'oeil*, and a certain strand of modernism. The attraction of writing is that it escapes this logic. Neither a formal entity in itself nor an illusionistic image of something else, it marks the potential discrepancy between material and identity, the discrepancy that makes money, painting, and, ultimately, persons possible. But how are persons possible? Or, to put the question in its most general form, how is representation possible? (169–70)

In Michaels's essay the three versions of context combine to produce a more ambiguous stance on the underlying issues.⁸⁴ The issue dividing the two authors appears to be less politics than problematics, less disciplinary affiliation than commitment to realism as the basis for contextual construction.

Given my reading of these two books, then, the new problematic proposed by Bercovitch still leaves major options for one trying to mediate the incompatible premises underlying the new historicization and the search for a new kind of realism through contextualism. Thus if the old question "Does American Studies have a method?" appears superseded by "Does American Studies have a problematic?", the answer to the new question still leads all too often to the old answers even as the field tries to cope with the implications of the new trends in the human sciences. From a strong contextualist position, the answers arise all too often from the relation of power to changing times and to professional concerns ascribed according to unproblematized contextualist premises. From the textualist position the forms of these answers seem as familiar as the form of the question. In brief, to paraphrase an old adage, the more the times change (a contextualist view), the more the forms remain the same (a textualist view) so that all sides feel justified in their methodologies. Must all who would mediate between the divergent positions reify social structure as they demystify social production and reconstruct their own Great Story as they deconstruct our hegemonic heritage? Or must all textualize as they contextualize, poeticize as they politicize? Must any new American Studies like its forebears issue forth in not one methodology but many like the diverse, conflictual America of which it is said to be producer and product, according to so many cultural studies? What issues forth seems to be the very issue dividing what I have termed the textualist and contextualist problematics. Not only where the road leads but also its width, to use my well-worn metaphor one last time, seems fundamental to the contest.

Proponents of both a textualist poetics and contextualist politics seek to constitute the conceptual framework of a new American Studies, but they basically oppose, even deconstruct, each other. At bottom, poetics and politics rest on contradictory approaches to that classic concern of American Studies:

context. Just as their proponents in the larger intellectual world engage in mutual deconstruction without convincing their opponents, so too the efforts to transcend the conceptual problems only reinforce the dilemmas of philosophical and political choice necessary in American Studies at this moment. Thus we must look not only at poetics and politics in American Studies discourse and texts but also at the politics and poetics of American Studies itself as text and discourse. We must look at current American Studies scholarship as text and its context with all the problems of reflexivity this perspective suggests. From this viewpoint problems become matters of problematics.

Even how we should plot the narrative of the story about the quest for a new American Studies rests upon, as it takes positions upon, the problematics. Should we assume that the changing vocabularies during the past four decades represent progress in refining our terminology in the light of increasing conceptual sophistication, or merely altered intellectual and political preferences? Should we tell the story as one of changing climates of opinion (old vocabulary) or struggles for intellectual and political hegemony (new vocabulary)? Should it be emplotted according to the trope of irony—or of romance?⁸⁵ Has the American Studies movement entered its own postmodern phase because of its engagement(s) with poststructuralist, post-Marxist, postfeminist, and even posthistoricist theory and practice?⁸⁶ Does this answer depend upon one's choices of narrative plotting and viewpoint or perspective on discourse and politics? Should we postulate rupture or continuity, and what difference does each plotting make for what and for whom? Will the return to a neo-Progressive version of American history as overall context bring back a simpler link between text and context, between language and social reality that denies the more sceptical implications of the linguistic turn for interpretive security and political certainty? Only the future can reveal the answers to these questions, but will the construction of that history be plotted any differently in form than what now converts the past into present use?⁸⁷

NOTES

1. We today probably portray the era of classic American Studies as more unified than it was in practice, but see Gene Wise's delineation of the essential assumptions of classic American Studies in his "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31 (bibliography issue, 1979): 306–07. Compare "masked patterns" and "metapatterns" as covert foundations in Richard Sykes, "American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and a Method," *American Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1963): 259–60.

2. Note, for instance, the overall theme, the session titles, and the paper topics of the 1988 American Studies Association meeting.

3. Contrast as exemplars of consensus and division respectively Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), with Alan Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982).

4. I argue this in spite of the renewed popularity of cultural studies. Compare, for example, the presuppositions of the first extended discussion of the culture concept in the *American Quarterly* by Richard Sykes, cited in note 1, or Cecil Tate, *The Search for a Method in American Studies*

(Minneapolis, 1973) with those of Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, 1988) or John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill, 1987), 254–89. For a brief overview of the transition in anthropology, see Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 126–66. Following the transition from cultural unity to social division as the clue to interpreting culture has been the passing of the patron sainthood of cultural studies from Clifford Geertz to Raymond Williams.

5. A convenient list of six ways of contextualizing is provided by Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983), 35–59. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), provides a definition of contextualization, 17–19. David Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands, 1985), discusses the issues as argued recently but traditionally by intellectual historians.

6. The authors collected in Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, 1982), and *Material Culture: A Research Guide* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1985), seek a better methodology for the field.

7. Compare Gordon R. Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly* 26 (May 1974): 141–59, with Dominick LaCapra, "History and the Novel," in his *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985), 115–34.

8. As seen in many of the interviews summarized by Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman, Okla., 1970).

9. As argued about the meaning of a literary work, for instance: compare P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton, 1980), and Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, 1982), 93–125. Compare my notion of simple contextualism with the premises of what Peter Novick terms "objectivism" in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 1–2.

10. As I christen it in "The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice," *Poetics Today* 9 (1988): 435–52. My thoughts on this matter were inspired by Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison, 1978), 129–49. The premise of the "Great Story" holds true even if the explicit form of the history is not narrative but quantitative or other form of argument.

11. Henry Nash Smith discusses these three terms in his "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, 1986), 21–35.

12. Compare this quotation from the first paragraph of the preface to the first edition of *Virgin Land* with his reconsideration of the matter in the preface to its twentieth anniversary republication (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), and his article cited in preceding note. To what extent did the early debate about whether American Studies had a method revolve about how to achieve this peculiar fusion of text and context?

13. As argued by, for example, Marian J. Morton, *The Terrors of Ideological Politics: Liberal Historians in a Conservative Mood* (Cleveland, 1972), and Jesse Lemisch, *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession* (Toronto, 1975). See on the transition Bernard Sternsher, *Consensus, Conflict, and American Historians* (Bloomington, 1975), and Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations* (Homewood, Ill., 1973).

14. Was this primarily a contribution of American Studies? See Gene Wise, "Political 'Reality' in Recent American Scholarship: Progressives Versus Symbolists," *American Quarterly* 19 (Summer supplement 1967): 303–28; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," in *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences*, ed. Louis Schneider and Charles Bonjean (Cambridge, 1973), 77–100.

15. Sacvan Bercovitch, *Reconstructing American Literary History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), viii. Has the increasing use of the term *problematic* in American Studies broadened its meaning so as to become synonymous with one sense of *paradigm* as defined earlier?

16. Introductions to these theories and their implications may be found conveniently in such recent anthologies as Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse*; Ann Jefferson and David Robey, eds.,

Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction (2d ed., London, 1986); Joseph Natoli, ed., *Tracing Literary Theory* (Urbana, Ill., 1987). For interpretive introductions to these implications, see, among many others, Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983); and Howard Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory* (Oxford, 1985).

17. Compare, for example, Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," with the introduction to Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), and Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties."

18. Myra Jehlen argues, for example, that the two chief contemporary developments inspiring *Ideology and Classic American Literature* are the "political categories of race, gender, and class" entering into the very realm of language itself and the "education of American critics in European theories of culture" (1).

19. The connection between the social construction of reality and the cultural construction of reality is an ambiguous one depending upon the relationship presumed between texts and reality. Although both the social and cultural construction of reality presume that concepts, categories, and other ideation are culturally persistent (but still politically arbitrary), the causes of such ideation may be ascribed differently according to the interpreter's views of the role of language, ideation, social class, and material circumstances in the creation of "reality."

20. Compare the usage of "plastic" and "autonomous" in Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action* (Cambridge, 1977). This argument is allied to, but not the same as, the one over human agency versus structural explanation in interpreting social behavior.

21. Or so argued Richard Harlan, *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (London, 1987), 67-68. Of these trends to denaturalization, those of feminist theory are most advanced in conceptualization but even in this field not all problems are resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Compare in literature, for example, Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York and London, 1985); and Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary Theory* (New York, 1988). In history, see for example, Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (Dec. 1986): 1053-75; and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 11-52.

22. I distinguish between text and discourse in this article because the two terms follow from the differing premises of textualism and contextualism respectively. As Gunther Kress, "Ideological Structures in Discourse," in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk (London, 1985), vol. 4: 27, states: "Discourse is a category that belongs to and derives from the social domain, and text is a category that belongs to and derives from the linguistic domain." Or, as Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987), 74, argues succinctly "... that discourse is rhetorical, that rhetoric is a form of persuasion, and that persuasion is a form of power, an instrument of social manipulation and control." Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction* (London, 1986), consonant with her title, stresses that speech and writing are shaped by social conflict and the struggle for power.

23. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), 141. The denial of a biological basis to human nature and the invention of a universal self-interestedness in the eighteenth century is fundamental to the historical and political argument of Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and the New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984), 26-27, 34-35, 101. Denaturalization of race combined with demystification of its class origins can lead to a rematerialization of class as the social reality of race and ethnicity, as, for example, in Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 143-77.

24. The scholarly repudiation of a general American mind and an overall national character in favor of a divided America began with New Left, Bottom-up, and working-class scholarship. See the interviews from *Radical History Review* reprinted in Henry Abelove, et al. eds., *Visions of History* (New York, 1984).

25. Wanda Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *The Art Bulletin* 70 (June 1988): 199-200, but compare her entire narrative with my version of the changes in

American Studies. Tom Kando, "Popular Culture and Its Sociology: Two Controversies," *Journal of Popular Culture* 9 (Fall 1975): 439-55, dehierarchalized while he discussed the various "kinds" of culture(s). How the cultures became hierarchalized in the first place is the story of Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

26. For two early examples of formalist/structuralist analysis of popular culture in American Studies, see Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, 1975); and Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville, 1975).

27. As quoted in an article on a session devoted to cultural studies at the 1988 Modern Language Association convention in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 18, 1989): A4.

28. Cited in note 4 above.

29. The theme of the article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* cited in note 27. The combination of cultural and political criticism is not new: see Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987).

30. And noted again more recently by Anthony Giddens in *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley, 1979), 168-74, but see whole chapter on the reflexive problems of ideological analysis.

31. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), was important for this movement in the United States.

32. Hayden White, "Structuralism and Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 7 (1974): 759-75, was a significant early statement on the implications of structuralism for denying essentialism as well as hierarchy in understanding culture(s) and language use.

33. *Mythologies*, 75. Do demystification of social origins and dehierarchalization of cultures also deny reification of the abstract concepts used to describe themselves or might they have no effect on the textualization of their own description?

34. See the fears expressed by John Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (Oct. 1987): 879-907. No social scientist in the United States has argued more persistently for a transformation of his discipline's orientation than Richard H. Brown, whose most recent book's title conveys the general idea: *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago, 1987), as does his earlier *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 1977). In history the seminal American thinker is Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987).

35. Cultural construction as opposed to social construction of "reality" seems more "textually arbitrary" to me.

36. Transforms "history" into ideology and/or text. See my "The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice" for argument and references.

37. The difference between the nature of deconstruction in France and the United States is the major theme of Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (Urbana, 1988). Compare, among many, on deconstruction Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York, 1983); and Christopher Norris, *Contested Faculties: Philosophy and Theory after Deconstruction* (New York, 1985).

38. White, *The Content of the Form*, 189-90, provides a very brief summary of what some basic theories of language postulate about their own understanding of and place in the world.

39. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn," 901-02.

40. See, for example, the essays on "Realism," "Relativism," and "Skepticism" in Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Westport, 1986), 366-72, 376-83, 402-08. Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification" in Canary and Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History*, 3-39, treats realism among other topics in his brief historical survey.

41. For arguments on the importance of realism to historical practice in general and in Marxism specifically, Christopher Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford, 1986), esp. 96-177; and Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (London, 1981), 24-44, 66-91.

Compare the classic Marxian doctrine that social existence determines, influences, etc., social

consciousness. The debate over structure/superstructure and difficulties of text/context in regard to this matter for some modern Marxists can be seen in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981).

42. For contrasting reader-response models in American Studies see Mailloux, cited in note 9 above, and Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Elizabeth Long, "Women, Reading, and Cultural Authority: Some Implications of the Audience Perspective in Cultural Studies," *American Quarterly* 38 (Fall 1986): 591-612.

43. Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction*, 169.

44. Compare Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, 1982), 151, who distinguishes between strong and weak textualists.

45. That the narrow textualism of the New Criticism is presumed to have prepared the way for structuralism and poststructuralism in the United States can be found in the very titles of Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction*, and the earlier book by Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980). The differing reception of structuralism and poststructuralism in the United States as opposed to in France, as Berman argues, constitutes an interesting topic for American Studies itself through a study of contextualization. Do different ways of textualizing the story produce the differing views of context, or do differing views of the context produce different histories?

46. For an early statement in this vein, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, 1979), 73-101. Compare Brown, *Society as Text*, cited in note 36 above, esp. chap. 6: "Social Reality as Narrative Text: Interactions, Institutions, and Politics as Language."

47. Definitions of intertextuality differ according to the relationship presumed between texts and their contexts and how to go about understanding that relationship. Compare, for example, "Intertextuality" in *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, ed. A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, trans. Larry Crist, Daniel Patte, et al. (Bloomington, 1982), 160-61; with Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984), 59-60.

48. Wright much more so, in my opinion, than Glassie, both works cited in note 28 above.

49. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986).

50. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986).

51. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987).

52. Similarly, even though Trachtenberg in *The Incorporation of America* hopes to convince his reader that what most Americans in the past, and therefore present, see as reality in contrast to appearance is just the opposite when considered as hegemonic and authentic cultures, he too presents no doubt about how easy it is for him to understand the past and present as context in his own textualization.

53. The trend started by Raymond Williams, *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976), in portraying contending definitions as stances in ideological battles eventuates in such works as Robert Alford and Roger Friedland, *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, The State, and Democracy* (Cambridge, 1985), esp. the glossary, 444-51, or Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (New York, 1987).

54. No one contributed more to this end than Michel Foucault. For a collection of recent essays on both the achievement(s) and the so-called "problem" of Foucault, see *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David C. Hoy (Oxford, 1986). Is the role of power in a society as tautologically omnipresent for the contemporary contextualist position as the role of language is tautologically self-referential for today's textualist stance?

55. In addition to reading Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, as a contribution to the poetics of ethnicity, could one view Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Conn., 1986), as pointing in a similar direction?

56. To what extent could the image studies of race be read in this way? For example, see the light-handed approach of Raymond W. Stedman, *Shadows of the American Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman, Okla., 1982), or Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978).

57. Does Nancy Miller, ed., *The Poetics of Gender* (New York, 1986) live up to its title? Teresa de Laurentis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 1–50, offers many interesting suggestions along these lines. See also Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9–39.

58. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies of English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), and Zygmunt Bauman, *Memories of Class: The Pre-History and After-Life of Class* (London, 1982), suggest some possibilities in this direction.

59. In addition to Brown, *Society as Text* and *Poetics of Sociology*, could some histories of sociological theory be reconstrued as guides to a poetics of society? For example, Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (New York, 1969), on the metaphor of growth, and Werner Stark, *The Fundamental Forms of Social Thought* (London, 1962), on society as an organism or mechanism.

60. Anthropologists seem farther along toward a reconsideration of their basic working concept than sociologists: James A. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts* (Cambridge, 1982); *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986); Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, 1988).

61. In addition to White's books cited in note 36 above, see *History and Theory*, Beiheft 26 (1987): "The Representation of Historical Events," and Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, 1989).

62. Should one draw this conclusion from White, *Metahistory*?

63. Martin Burke, personal communication, September 5, 1988, playing on the now classic title of Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). Richard Terdiman has also queried: "Is there class in this class?"

64. See, for example, Mary Pratt, "Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations: On Anglo-American Reader-Response Criticism," in *Postmodernism and Politics*, ed. Jonathan Arac (Minneapolis, 1986), and "Ideology and Speech Act Theory," *Poetics Today* 7 (no. 1, 1986): 59–72. Frederick J. Newmeyer, *The Politics of Linguistics* (Chicago, 1986), provides a brief history of its topic until recent times.

65. This is my modification of a definition by Peter C. Sederberg, *Politics of Meaning: Power and Explanation in the Construction of Social Reality* (Tucson, 1984), 9: "politics . . . [is] the deliberate effort to control shared meaning," but see chs. 1–3 in general.

66. Quoted in Macdonnell, *Theories of Discourse*, 76.

67. On the importance of realism to Marxism, McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History*, 24–44, 66–91.

68. Can the critique of the realistic novel as bourgeois in origin be extended to other forms of realism? See for a provocative interpretation, Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, 1982).

69. To borrow Jameson's term for a meta-narrative, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11 (Autumn 1979): 46.

70. Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (June 1986): 120–36.

71. Nell Irvin Painter, "Bias and Synthesis in History," *Ibid.* 74 (June 1987): 109–12.

72. Richard Wightman Fox, "Public Culture and The Problem of Synthesis," *Ibid.*, 113–16; Roy Rosenzweig, "What Is the Matter with History?" *Ibid.*, 117–22.

73. The political contentions and assumptions underlying American historiography and methodology in the last two decades are the subject of Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "The Two New

Historians: Competing Paradigms for Interpreting the American Past," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 2 (May 1983): 9-12; Fred Matthews, "Hobbesian Populism: Interpretive Paradigms and Moral Vision in American Historiography," *Journal of American History* 47 (June 1985): 92-115; John D. Diggins, "Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 614-38.

74. The difficulty of changing voice and viewpoint in the presentation of history, let alone in finding a new key to synthesis, is illustrated in the efforts of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library to integrate the history of American Indians into the teaching of United States history. See, for example, the topics and voices in *Indians in American History: An Introduction*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1988). See also the essays in *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, ed. Calvin Martin (New York, 1987), on adopting an "Indian" viewpoint in history.

75. Alford and Friedland, *Powers of Theory*, 411, liken the contending theories of the state with their assumptions about power to disputes about what constitutes proper plays in a game, rules of the game, and the very game itself.

76. On the methodological conflict in literature over the theory of literature versus current literary theory and the historicization of critical practices and schools: Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987); Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York, 1988); Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (New York, 1986). Does Novick, *That Noble Dream*, serve a similar function for the historical profession?

77. Murray Krieger in his introduction to *The Aims of Representation: Subject/Text/History* (New York, 1987), plots the history of changing critical concerns in the United States, as the subtitle suggests, from first a focus on the author then to writing itself and now to the social and political context producing the text. This is also the message of Berkovitch and Jehlen in *Reconstructing American Literary History*. In the move from grand theory to historicization, the literary critics seem to be following the earlier cycle of the social sciences. Among many arguing for a historical sociology as antidote to the grand theorizing of Talcott Parsons and others, see Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Ithaca, 1982); Theda Skocpol, *Visions and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1984). Naturally the approaches to textualization and context differ among social scientists as well as between the literary and the sociological approaches to historicization, but few espouse a very strong textualist stand. See, for example, Anthony Giddens coping with recent trends in the human sciences in his exposition on "Structuralism, Post-structuralism and the Production of Culture," in *Social Theory Today*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner (Stanford, Calif., 1987), 195-223.

78. Whether this sentence should also read "the history of the social construction of these categories and their referents" depends once again upon the positions taken on textualism and contextualization.

79. On Jameson's dilemmas, see among others William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, 1984), and Cornel West, "Ethics and Action in Fredric Jameson's Marxist hermeneutics," in Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics*, 123-44.

80. But see the usable revision of history offered by Guenter Lenz, "American Studies and the Radical Tradition: From the 1930s to the 1960s," *Prospects* 12 (1987): 21-58. Compare Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture*, ch. 7.

81. As Wendy Steiner, "Collage or Miracle: Historicism in a Deconstructed World," in Berkovitch and Jehlen, *Reconstruction of American Literary History*, 323-51, seems to do in the end. Whether such an era of postscepticism should be achieved in that way I leave to my readers. Will future historians of American intellectual life interpret this search for explanatory and interpretive security in so many disciplines through contextualization by normal historical practice as a return to methodological conservatism after a period of interpretive free play and disciplinary scepticism? Is the search for a new realism the conceptual analogue to Reaganism in the ways of academic understanding, even though the explicit political messages may be liberal or even radical? Do radical political messages code more convincingly using conservative or traditional forms of representation?

82. Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986).

83. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley, 1987). This is listed as the second volume in "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics."

84. As he writes, "the deconstructive interest in materiality in signification is not intrinsically ahistorical" in spite of conventional wisdom to the contrary (28). For a good introduction to recent thinking on this point, see *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge, 1987).

85. Or, more precisely, comedy, to employ the approach of White, *Metahistory*, to the tropological nature of historical representation. See also James M. Mellard, *Doing Tropology: Analysis of Narrative Discourse* (Urbana, 1987), for an introduction to the topic.

86. To what extent does the prefix *post* mean more than to speak of recent intellectual movements in the past tense as so many recent discussions do? For a brief guide to the issues and bibliography of postmodernism, consult Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics*, ix–xliii. If postmodernism is defined as the end of grand or meta-narrative, following Jean Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Masumi (Minneapolis, 1984), should we liken it to the earlier end of ideology debate, for which see Job. L. Dittberner, *The End of Ideology and American Social Thought, 1930–1960* (Ann Arbor, 1979)?

87. Is this the lament of Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley, 1986), on the problems of narrativizing the past as history?