little engagement with Marxism by American Studies scholars, and few marxists interpreting American culture: American cultural history has not yet seen the "revisionist" historiography that marks American diplomatic, labor, and social history in the work, for example, of Gabriel Kolko, David Montgomery, and Eugene Genovese. In this essay, I will not only survey marxist studies of American culture but also suggest some reasons for this unequal development by reconsidering the old question of "American exceptionalism," and exploring the curious sense, held by marxists and non-marxists alike, that "American marxism" is "an absurd proposition," at once an oxymoron and an pleonasm.4

American Studies as a Substitute for Marxism

When we examine the meaning of Americanism, we discover that Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory, . . . but a doctrine—what socialism is to a socialist. Like socialism, Americanism is looked upon not patriotically, as a personal attachment, but rather as a highly attenuated, conceptualized, platonic, impersonal attraction toward a system of ideas, a solemn assent to a handful of final notions—democracy, liberty, opportunity, to all of which the American adheres rationalistically much as a socialist adheres to his socialism—because it does him good, because it gives him work, because, so he thinks, it guarantees his happiness. Americanism has thus served as a substitute for socialism.

—Leon Samson, 1934

There are two principal reasons why there have not been substantial marxist cultural studies dealing with the United States. The first has to do with the way marxist cultural thought reentered American intellectual activity in the last quarter century. It has come through the rediscovery, translation, and interpretation of continental "western marxists": Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Korsch, Sartre, Althusser, Lefebvre.6 Fredric Jameson’s 1971 book Marxism and Form may stand as the epitome of this work, and it is significant that his professional affiliation is French language and literature. The most interesting work of American marxist cultural critics since then has remained centered on European theory, texts, and culture: one finds this in journals like Telos, New German Critique, and Semiotexte. Unlike the powerful impact of the British marxist historiography (E. P. Thompson, Hobsbawm, Hilton, Hill and others) on American history writing, European marxist cultural theory has, to date, left little imprint on American cultural studies.7

The second reason lies in the peculiar formation of "American Studies" itself, which has served as a substitute for a developed marxist culture. American Studies emerged as both a continuation of and response to the popular "discovery" and "invention" of "American culture" in the 1930s, a discovery marked in such contrary slogans as "the American way of life" and "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." Though Warren Susman,

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the finest analyst of the culture of the thirties, has seen the concept of culture as finally conservative—nationalist, nostalgic, and sentimentally populist—I would argue that its wide ideological range allowed the “American Studies” it spawned to function as a substitute Marxism in two quite different ways. First, American Studies served as the quintessential alternative to Marxist explanations, the embodiment and explication of the American Way, the “genius of American politics”; its interdisciplinary and totalizing (perhaps “pluralizing”) ambitions rivaled those of Marxism, which was understood simply as Soviet ideology. American Studies in its imperial guise was based on the uniqueness of the American experience, and, as Gene Wise pointed out, this Cold War vision of the American tradition attracted corporate funding and moved overseas as an intellectual arm of American foreign policy. One might take the work of Daniel Boorstin as the epitome of this side of American Studies: both his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, naming names, affirming that “a member of the Communist Party should not be employed by a university,” and placing his own work in the context of the anticommunist crusade; and his three-volume The Americans (1958, 1965, 1974), the finest cultural history of the United States from the point of view of capitalism. For American Studies, “American Marxism” was essentially an oxymoron: Americanism substituted for Marxism as an antidote. Yet there was another strain in American Studies which had a more complex relation to the Marxist tradition: the practice of American cultural history as a form of radical culture critique. In a recent essay, Alan Trachtenberg has argued that the “myth/symbol” school had its origins in “a strain within American cultural history itself, its own ‘usable past’ so to speak, in a line which runs at least from Emerson through Whitman and Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford . . . a cultural-political current brought to a particular focus in the work and career of F. O. Matthiessen, whose importance in the launching of a “myth and symbol” enterprise has hardly been stressed enough.” This tradition, he maintains, saw “cultural criticism as a form of cultural reconstruction” and attempted a “comprehensive view of American life, a view in which the distinctions as well as the relations between culture and society were clear and definitive.” Its politics began from “an embattled posture against what it defined as ‘commercialism,’ a cultural reflex . . . of corporate consumer capitalism.” The myth and symbol group shared “a critical vision of Cold War America and . . . a critical view of American historical experience.” Out of this tradition of radical cultural criticism have come the most significant works in American Studies, and it is this tradition which continues to draw the fire of the academic right, as when Kenneth Lynn, in a review of Jackson Lears’ No Place of Grace, dubbed it “anti-American Studies.”

Ironically, this “critical” American Studies has also served as a “substitute Marxism.” For its direct ancestry is less Emerson than the peculiar union of the cultural criticism which sought an American “usable past”—that of Brooks, Mumford, Kenneth Burke, Waldo Frank—and the cultural politics of the popular front Communism of the late 1930s and 1940s, which recovered and celebrated American folk culture. The figure of F. O. Matthiessen is indeed central to this union and to its later influence in American Studies. This ancestry has had several consequences for the relation between Marxism and American cultural studies. On the one hand, this moment established the left politics and critical stance of an important element of American Studies; and, in a sort of intellectual popular front, the work of these cultural critics, like the progressive history-writing of Beard and Parrington which influenced it, was occasionally mistaken for an American Marxism. (There are moments when one wishes it were so, as when Frank Lentricchia attempts to claim Kenneth Burke as a “western Marxist”; but there are also moments when one must decline: consider the confusion of Marxism with economic determinism as a result of the influence of Beard’s “economic interpretation” of history.) Moreover, by combining the search for a usable past with popular front “Americanism,” this group of intellectuals entered a more serious engagement with American culture than did the other major left cultural formation of the thirties, the group of anti-Stalinist modernists around Partisan Review. A signal of the difference is their respective treatments of Melville. For the “Americanist” cultural critics, Melville became a key figure of the usable past in the work of Mumford, Matthiessen, Newton Arvin and Leo Marx. The avowedly cosmopolitan “New York intellectuals” kept their distance from Melville, finding the sources of a critical culture in European modernism.

However, the possibility of an American Marxist cultural studies was also blocked by this formation. The political alliance with the popular front prevented an engagement with the more sophisticated Marxism of the anti-Stalinist left; thus no “Americanists” were associated with the short-lived Marxist Quarterly which attracted America’s equivalents of “western Marxism”: Sidney Hook, Lewis Corey, and Meyer Shapiro, among others. But the Stalinized Marxism of the Communist Party could not support a serious cultural criticism, and F. O. Matthiessen’s critical reviews of the Marxist literary histories by Granville Hicks and V. F. Calverton are a sign of this tradition’s formative break with that “vulgar Marxism.”

As a result, this critical tradition of American Studies has often combined radical dissent with an ambivalence toward Marxist theory, a disposition it shared with the emerging New Left. However, at present this stance leads to a common, if curious rhetoric in American cultural studies, which finds an exaggerated, but not unusual, example in Jackson Lears’ recent essay on “cultural hegemony.” After repeatedly condemning the “rigidities of orthodox Marxism,” “Marxist teleology,” and “Marx’s epigones” (without citing them by name), he builds his argument around the contributions of Gramsci,
Genovese, Jameson, Bakhtin, Williams, Thompson, Stuart Hall, and Henri Lefebvre—all marxists. Marx, like any other important thinker, has his epigones—second-rate imitators and followers—and worse. But the straw man of “orthodox marxism” obscures the fact that the figures Lear cites positively are central to the marxist tradition. Thus, the continuing spectre of a Second International or Stalinist marxism often prevents a serious engagement with contemporary marxism, and leads to the random borrowing of terms from a Gramsci, a Williams, a Benjamin—borrowings that too often ignore the context and role of the concepts in a larger conceptual system and tradition.14

So this critical American Studies has become a “substitute marxism” in the pleonastic sense, from the popular front claim that Communism was simply twentieth-century Americanism, to the New Left sense that there was an indigenous radical tradition that preempted marxism, and now to the covert, pragmatic appropriation and Americanization of marxist concepts without the baggage of the marxist tradition. Behind this dance of marxism and Americanism lies, however, not merely the circumstances of the arrival and Americanization of the immigrant “marxism” but the larger question of “American exceptionalism.”

The notion of “American exceptionalism” is in many ways the foundation of the “discipline” of “American Studies”; whether the answers are cast in terms of the “American mind,” the “national character,” American “myths and symbols,” or “American culture,” the founding question of the discipline remains “What is American?” Consider the difference if the discipline had been constituted as “cultural studies,” as was the case with the discipline that grew out of the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall in Britain; like American Studies, British cultural studies grew out of a dissatisfaction with an ahistorical and technical literary criticism and with a Stalinist marxism in the 1950s. Both disciplines practiced cultural criticism to recover a usable past for cultural reconstruction: F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941) and Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden (1964) on one side of the Atlantic were paralleled by Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy (1957) and Raymond Williams’ Culture and Society (1958) on the other.15 But in “cultural studies,” the central questions—“what is culture?”, “what are its forms and how is it related to material production?”—formed a more productive theoretical agenda, and allowed a more serious engagement with marxism than did the question “What is American?” As a result, the work of Raymond Williams has proved richer and more prolific than any of the founding generation of American Studies, and the underfunded and understaffed Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has produced a body of work with greater range and political and intellectual influence than that of any American Studies program.16 In American Studies, the focus on American uniqueness often prevented the emergence of a more general “cultural studies,” and tended to ignore non-American theoretical paradigms.

The issue of American exceptionalism may be cast in many ways, but for socialists, and for those implicitly or explicitly debating them, it is summed up in the question the German sociologist Werner Sombart posed in 1905: “Why no socialism in America?” Despite perennial attempts to dismiss it as one of those fruitless “negative” historical questions, it has been continually returned to since Sombart. In the question lie two different issues which have not been sufficiently distinguished. The first is an historical question: why has there been no (or so little) socialist class consciousness among American workers, or, as it is usually put, why has there not developed a major labor, social democratic or communist party in the United States? There are a number of excellent reviews of this question, and I will not recapitulate them.17 The second, theoretical question is, however, central to the relation between marxism and American Studies: do the categories of marxism apply to the United States? Is the historical experience of the U. S. so unique, so exceptional as to require an entirely new theoretical framework?

The sense that America has “disproved” Marx pervades much of the “exceptionalist” debate. In part this is because most “exceptionalists” continue to take the evolutionary marxism of the Second International which forecast an inevitable transition to socialism as “marxism”; thus to disprove the “inevitability of socialism” is to disprove the entire theory. However, the historical defeats of the socialist and workers’ movements in the aftermath of the First World War and the complex history of the Soviet Union have purged from contemporary marxism any simple (or even complex) inevitabilist. The “western marxism” that “American Studies” confronts is a tradition of more than half a century which begins from the defeat of “inevitabilist” hopes and assumptions, a tradition which has chastened the prophetic mode without forgoing engagement.18

Nevertheless, other exceptionalists see American development as disproving not only the prediction of a socialist opposition or future, but also the methods and categories of marxist analysis, historical materialism. This often remains implicit or cast in ambiguous formulations. Take this formula of Louis Hartz: “Marx fades because of the fading of Laud.” Does this simply mean that “there will not be a marxist opposition because there is not a Laudian establishment” (Hartz’s plausible historical argument of no feudalism, no socialism), or does it mean, as its rhetorical structure suggests, that “Marx’s analysis becomes wrong, or at least irrelevant, in the liberal fragment society”? There are several reasons why the latter claim remains rhetorically implied rather than explicitly argued. First, most treatments of “American exceptionalism” have recognized that European marxists, from Marx and Engels to Lenin, Trotsky, and Gramsci, have themselves suggested the factors that have made the United States exceptional—the absence of feudalism, the free land of the frontier, the appearance of greater prosperity and mobility, the centrality of race and ethnicity, and the ideological power of “Americanism”—and have debated their
effects on the development of a workers’ movement in the United States. So marxism as a theoretical framework does not necessarily blind one to the peculiarities of the Americans.\textsuperscript{19}

Second, the relation between history and theory posited by the anti-marxist American exceptionalists is a crude pragmatism—if it doesn’t work, it’s not true—or a simple historicism—in another time, in another place. Marx was right. The first is tricky because it provokes the question of whether the United States’ uniquely un-marxist character means that, in nonexceptional countries, marxism is true; the latter—often calling itself post-marxism—responds by characterizing Marx and his progeny as old-fashioned. In the end, neither of these work. To establish that American development is in many senses unique is not to demonstrate the irrelevance of marxist theory. American Studies must mount a theoretical argument that could persuade us that its “methods,” its categories, and its “discipline” are more adequate to cultural studies than is marxism. Though such an argument might be constructed on a number of grounds, the most common theme has been to stress marxism’s undervaluing of the power of ideological factors. So Louis Hartz early wrote that “the instinctive tendency of all Marxists to discredit the ideological factors as such blinded them to many of the consequences, purely psychological in nature, flowing from the nonfeudal issue. Was not the whole complex of ‘Americanism’ an ideological question?”\textsuperscript{20} In the next section of this essay I will consider four major cultural and ideological grounds for American exceptionalism, all of which, it could be argued, have founded the distinctive work of American Studies, and have seemed beyond marxist abilities: the distinctive American literary tradition of the romance; the role of the frontier in American imagination; the ideological power of the Puritan covenant; and the consumer culture of the “people of plenty.” A marxist revision of American cultural history would have to revise persuasively our understanding of these aspects of American culture; I hope to show that that revision is underway.

\textit{Toward a Revisionist History of American Culture}\textsuperscript{21}

Since American Studies grew out of literary criticism, it is not surprising that one of its earliest cultural revisions lay in literary history: a powerful argument that the uniqueness of American fiction lay in its repeated flight from history and society, its myth of Adamic innocence, and its reconstitution of romance within the novel form. Though somewhat shopworn and battered, this interpretive paradigm—founded by R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Chase, and Leslie Fiedler—continues to inform studies of American literature, and, perhaps more importantly, forms a part of the common sense of American literary history. Further, this understanding of American fiction would seem to disable the social and historical concerns that characterize marxist critics of the European novel from Lukács to Jameson. If Balzac is the classical instance for a marxist criticism, Melville would seem to lie beyond its boundaries. However, several critics have turned to the work of Georg Lukács to contest or revise our understanding of the American romance. The pioneering efforts were Harry Henderson’s use of Lukács’ treatment of the historical novel in his \textit{Versions of the Past} (1974), a discussion of the historical fiction written by “classic” American writers, and Myra Jehlen’s use of Lukács’ distinction between epic and novel, in her “New World Epics: The Novel and the Middle-Class in America” (1977), to recast the romance as a failed flight from an exceptionally pervasive ideological hegemony of the middle class. Yet the most powerful Lukácsian readings of American literature have derived from his analysis of the cultural effects of the commodity-form, his theory of reification: Michael T. Gilmore’s \textit{American Romanticism and the Marketplace} (1985) which analyzes the response of the romantics to the commodification of literature, and particularly Carolyn Porter’s \textit{Seeing and Being} (1981), which combines theoretical reflection with close readings to show that the antinomies of participant and observer in American texts are a response to reification. Thus, she argues, we can “no longer either luxuriate or despair in a belief that American literature’s classic tradition was defined primarily by a flight from society and the constraints of civilized life, but must at least entertain the possibility that, as a result of the relatively unimpeded development of capitalism in America, its literary history harbors a set of texts in which is inscribed, in its own terms, as deep and as penetrating a response to history and social reality as any to be found in the work of a Balzac or a George Eliot.”\textsuperscript{22}

The other response by marxist critics to the exceptionalism of the American romance has been to uncover and recover other literary traditions. A long overdue marxist reevaluation of the naturalist tradition has recently appeared in June Howard’s \textit{Form and History in American Literary Naturalism} (1985) and Rachel Bowby’s \textit{Just Looking} (1985). The work of leftist writers of the 1930s has been examined by Alan Wald and Robert Rosen, and H. Bruce Franklin’s recovery and interpretation of working-class and minority writing finds a thorough revision of American literary history in \textit{The Victim as Criminal and Artist} (1978).\textsuperscript{23}

Though marxist-feminist scholarship has focused more on women’s work and the politics and economics of gender than on women’s writing, the making of a marxist-feminist literary criticism can be seen in Lillian Robinson’s influential collection, \textit{Sex, Class, and Culture} (1978), and Rachael Blau DuPlessis’ \textit{Writing Beyond the Ending} (1985), which focuses on the relation between narrative and ideology in women’s writing. The important discussion of the politics and ideologies of women’s romantic fiction in the work of Ann Snitow, Tania Modleski, and Janice Radway has been informed by marxist-feminist theories of gender and sexuality as well as by marxist debates over popular literary forms.\textsuperscript{24}
And a similar concern for popular fiction has also produced significant Marxist work on science fiction. In these works, Marxist literary criticism is moving beyond offering Marxist "readings" of particular texts, and is beginning to reshape the contours of American literary history.

Behind the romance interpretation of American literary history lies perhaps the most durable explanatory framework for American history and culture, the frontier thesis. American Studies has in many ways restored the centrality of the frontier by shifting the debate from the economic and the political—the frontier as safety valve for class antagonisms, or as the source of democratic institutions—to the ideological—the frontier as a key to the American imagination. From Henry Nash Smith's classic *Virgin Land* (1950) to Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*, a 1973 revision provoked by the question "why are we in Viet Nam?", and Annette Kolodny's *The Land Before Her*, a 1984 feminist revision, the study of the myths of the frontier lies close to the heart of the method, content, and politics of American Studies. So it is perhaps not surprising that the frontier has provoked something very close to a Marxist revision of American culture in the work of Richard Slotkin, Michael Rogin, and Ronald Takaki. Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment* (1985) offers, first, an engagement between the methods and categories of American Studies and those of contemporary Marxist cultural criticism, between, in short, "myth" and "ideology," and second, an argument that, in the frontier myth, "the simple fable of the discovery of new land and the dispossession of the Indians substitutes for the complexities of capital formation, class and interest-group competition, and the subordination of society to the imperatives of capitalist development." Michael Rogin has combined historical materialism and a historical psychoanalysis in *Fathers and Children* (1975) and *Subversive Genealogy* (1983) to show how slavery and Indian war in American "primitive accumulation" gave a distinctive racial cast to American class conflict: the "American 1848," he argues, was the struggle over slavery. Ronald Takaki analyzes the domination of various peoples of color within the context of the development of capitalism and class divisions in his *Iron Cages* (1979), a work that draws on both the critical American Studies tradition and Marxist theory.

Focusing on white "culture-makers and policy makers," he explores the "cultural hegemony" of the republican, corporate, and imperial "iron cages." What Slotkin, Rogin, and Takaki have done is to recast the "special American conditions" of culture in an historical materialist way. The uniqueness of the United States lies in the contradictions of a specifically "settlement colonial" capitalism; indeed, perhaps the solution to the endless debates about American exceptionalism is to suspend the analogies with the development of capitalism in western Europe and look to the settler colonial cultures in South Africa, Australia, and North and South America. This work was begun, in a non-Marxist way, by the classic exponent of American exceptionalism, Louis Hartz, who focused on ideological issues, and it has been practiced particularly in the fields of comparative frontiers and comparative slavery and race relations. Stanley Greenberg's *Race and State in Capitalist Development* (1980) is an example of a Marxist attempt at such work, and it would seem to promise much to cultural studies. For when Marx wrote that the account of the development outlined in Capital was "expressly limited to the countries of western Europe," he referred specifically to its path of primitive accumulation. The absence of feudalism in settler colonial societies does not imply the absence of capitalist modes of production. Capitalism in the settler colonial societies was built not primarily on the expropriation and proletarianization of a peasantry nor on the "gift" of free land, but on the dispossession of the native peoples, imported slave and free labor, and racialized class structures.

From Marx's statement that "labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" to the political controversies between black and white Marxists, and between Marxists and non-Marxists in black liberation movements, the history of slavery and the subsequent entanglement of race and class has always been seen by Marxists, in the U. S. and abroad, as fundamental to understanding American history and society. The essays of Manning Marable and Eugene Genovese offer Marxist perspectives on historical, economic, and sociological work in Afro-American Studies. In Afro-American cultural studies from a Marxist perspective, there has been particular attention to what Cornel West has recently called the "two organic intellectual traditions in Afro-American life: The Black Christian Tradition of Preaching and The Black Musical Tradition of Performance." The interpretation of black religion forms the heart of Eugene Genovese's cultural history, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), and is central both to Cornell West's treatment of black intellectual traditions in his *Prophecy Deliverance!* (1982) and to V. P. Franklin's elaboration of "mass testimonies" in his *Black Self-Determination* (1984). Black music has found interpreters in a number of Marxist traditions, from popular front Communism (Sidney Finkelstein) to the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno) to a New Left Marxist surrealism (Paul Garon).

A critique of the Black Arts Movement and the "Black Aesthetic" of the 1960s was the starting point for two very different contemporary Marxist literary theories: Amiri Baraka's Marxist-Leninist essays collected in *Daggers and Javelins* (1984), and the post-structuralist Marxism of Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984). Though one finds its poetry in the political slogan and the other in the topics of discourse, they both attempt to base literary analysis in a vernacular culture and the material conditions of black life. A cultural materialism grounds the essays of John Brown Childs on Afro-American intellectuals of the early twentieth century, and Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (forthcoming), a study of the ways nineteenth-century black women writers reconstructed dominant sexual and racial
ideologies. These historical materialist analyses of Afro-American culture join
the Marxist revisions of the meaning of the myths of the frontier to establish
racial formation and conflict rather than wilderness and virgin land as the center
of American cultural studies.

Few controversies over the nature of American culture have failed to contest
the image of the Puritans. “Perhaps no other historical image, except that of the
frontier,” Warren Susman noted, “has been so crucial during the development
of our culture. Almost unchallenged has been the contention that Puritanism and
the Puritan past somehow determined much that has become characteristic of the
nation.” For American Studies, the reassessments of the errand of the “peculiar
people” have not only figured the peculiarities of the Americans, but have
provided exemplars of the “inter-discipline.” For the distance, even
marginality, of the Puritans from the canons of orthodox literary criticism,
historiography, political science, sociology, and religious studies, combined
with their presumed centrality to American culture, has allowed a richness
of interdisciplinary work that is unparalleled in other fields of American Studies.
In the face of this, it is striking that, though the study of English Puritanism
is dominated by the prolific Marxist historian Christopher Hill, there has been no
significant Marxist revision of the New England Puritan past. In part, this may
be an implicit challenge to the assumption that the Puritan legacy did determine
the characteristics of the United States; and in part, it may be a result of the
continuing uncertainty among Marxists as to how to characterize the mode
of production of the American colonies.

Nevertheless, the issue of Puritanism now confronts Marxist cultural critics
with new importance; for in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, it grounds an
influential and powerful version of “American exceptionalism.” In the rhetoric
of the Puritans, particularly in the form of the jeremiad, Bercovitch finds the
sources of “an increasingly pervasive middle-class hegemony”: “The ritual of
the jeremiad bespeaks an ideological consensus—in moral, religious, economic,
social, and intellectual matters—unmatched in any other modern culture.” In
one sense, Bercovitch’s argument adds a formal and rhetorical aspect to what
might be called the “Americanism” thesis, the principal ideological answer to
the question “why no socialism in America.” This argument is succinctly stated
by Leon Samson, a little-known American socialist thinker: “Every concept
in socialism has its substitute counter-concept in Americanism, and that is why
the socialist argument falls so fruitlessly on the American ear.” Thus, for
Bercovitch, no appeal to an American “revolution” can escape the proleptic
force of the tradition of the jeremiad, “the official ritual form of continuing
revolution”; the form of the jeremiad has contained and paralyzed American
radical dissent. However, Bercovitch himself, in a minor but not insignificant
moment, substitutes a Marxist category—“hegemony”—for his more usual
“Americanist” category—“consensus.” These two issues—the ideology of
“Americanism” and the use of “hegemony” as a substitute for “consensus” in
American Studies—have had their widest influence not in Puritan studies but in
the debates over American consumer or “mass” culture.

The discussion of American mass culture involves American exceptionalism
in two different ways. First, mass culture, whether celebrated as a culture of
affluence, the culture of a people of plenty, or denounced as mass deception,
was usually seen not as “uniquely” American, but as coming from the United
States. Unlike the Puritan past or the frontier, mass consumer culture was part of
the “American way of life” that could be exported. Second, mass culture has
been increasingly invoked as an explanation of the failure of socialism; whether
formulated as the “embourgeoisement” of workers through mass consumerism
or as the channeling of desire by the instruments of the mass media, mass culture
is often seen as a central aspect of middle-class “hegemony” in twentieth-
century America.

Perhaps because of the international repercussions of “Americanism and
Fordism,” the interpretation and critique of American mass culture is the only
area of American Studies that engaged the “western Marxists”; though Gramsci’s
prison notes on “Americanism and Fordism” were not translated into
English until 1971, the work of the Frankfurt School on mass culture began
appearing in English in the journal Studies in Philosophy and Social Science
in 1959, and essays by Theodor Adorno and Leo Lowenthal were included in
the pioneering 1957 anthology, Mass Culture. The particular analyses of film,
television, radio, jazz, magazine serials and horoscopes found their theoretical
base in Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the “culture industry” and
Herbert Marcuse’s later account of “one-dimensional man.” Elaborating
the theory of reification, they explored the distortions and mystifications inherent
in the penetration of culture by the commodity-form. The experience of fascist
culture in Germany combined with the shock of American “mass culture” led
the émigré Frankfurt Marxists on Morningside Heights to an overwhelmingly
negative response to the products of the culture industry. The dominance of the
commodity-form reduced all culture, high and low, to varieties of
advertisements. The products of the culture industry were a degeneration of
earlier folk and art forms, and numbed and anesthetized the senses.

The Frankfurt School analysis has been criticized as a mirror image of
conservative cultural elitism, and as an undialectical picture of a logic of the
commodity that permits neither contradiction nor resistance; indeed, too often
contemporary Marxist and non-Marxist discussions of mass culture open with
ritual exorcisms of the Frankfurt School. However, within the Frankfurt critical
theory, an alternative view of the “age of reification” can be found in the essays
of Walter Benjamin and the later work of Herbert Marcuse. The
controversies within and over the Frankfurt critique of mass culture have
reinvigorated discussions of “mass,” “consumer” or “popular” culture.
Perhaps the most important and influential theoretical reformulation is Fredric Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (1979). After arguing that we must “read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under late capitalism,” Jameson suggests that “works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicit, or explicitly Utopian as well”; his interpretations attempt to avoid both denunciation and celebration by showing that works of mass culture cannot “manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression.”

Among works that analyze the institutions and products of the culture industry, Stuart Ewen’s pioneering study of advertising, *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), is perhaps the most directly inspired by the Frankfurt School, and has been criticized for its depiction of the overwhelming power of advertising to shape desire and paralyze dissent. A sign of the present distance from this view is the more dialectical understanding of mass culture in the subsequent book by Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen. *Channels of Desire* (1982). The work of Herbert Schiller has focused on the economic organization of the culture industry, with particular attention to its international power. The related work of the Chilean Ariel Dorfman has focused on the impact of American mass culture in Latin America, in the classic *How to Read Donald Duck* (1975) and *The Empire's Old Clothes* (1983). Todd Gitlin has drawn on the marxist cultural theory of Stuart Hall in a detailed analysis of the effects of news coverage on oppositional movements, *The Whole World is Watching* (1980), and in one of the first significant studies of entertainment television, *Inside Prime Time* (1983). Film studies, which has developed somewhat separately, has had a vital marxist strain, particularly in Europe: American films were the subject of such classic essays as “John Ford’s Young Mr. Lincoln” by the Editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” in the British journal *Screen*. The developing American marxist film studies can be seen in the journals *Jump Cut* and *Cineaste*, and in the work of Bill Nichols, E. Ann Kaplan, Peter Biskind, and Robert Ray.

A dissatisfaction with an exclusive focus on the institutions and products of mass culture, and with assumptions of a passive and undifferentiated audience, has provoked a number of works that focus on the intersection of mass culture and class cultures. One line of work, following key essays by Martin Sklar on the cultural consequences of capitalism’s transition from accumulation to “disaccumulation,” and by Barbara and John Ehrenreich on the “professional-managerial class,” has explored the relations between mass culture, the new middle classes, and an emerging culture of abundance, consumption, and personality. Stanley Aronowitz’s *False Promises* (1973), on the other hand, remains the most ambitious attempt to interpret working-class history through the analysis of the effects of the commodity-form on the labor process and culture, “trivialized work, colonized leisure.” Further, it stands as one of the few works that places the experience of American workers at the center of a thorough revision of American cultural history. For, though the “new” labor history of the last two decades has reconstructed the picture of American workers and their lives, it has not yet fundamentally revised American cultural history. The story of American culture,” according to socialist cultural historian Warren Susman, “remains largely the story of . . . the enormous American middle class.” However, recent work building on the “new” labor history has begun to interpret American culture as the product of conflicts between classes and class fractions: Dan Schiller’s *Objectivity and the News* (1981) reinterprets the rise of the penny press through an attention to its artisan readers; my own *Mechanic Accents* (forthcoming) interprets cheap sensational fiction by reconstructing its place within working-class culture; and Roy Rosenzweig’s *Eight Hours for What We Will* (1983) examines the class conflicts over institutions of culture and leisure—the saloon, the nickelodeon, parks, and holiday celebrations. Sarah Eisenstein’s pathbreaking essays on working women’s consciousness have been followed by Elizabeth Ewen’s *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars* (1985), which examines the contradictory impact of American mass culture on Italian and Jewish immigrant women, and Kathy Peiss’ *Cheap Amusements* (1986), which analyzes the rituals and styles of working women’s leisure activities. And George Lipsitz offers a provocative view of the class origins of the popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s in *Class and Culture in the Cold War* (1982). Perhaps the major revisionist synthesis to date is Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982), which explores the effects of the corporate system on culture, and interprets the literal and figurative struggles between “incorporation” and “union” in the late nineteenth century.

Finally, I want to mention briefly a few of the major contributions to marxist cultural theory by contemporary North American marxists. Clearly the most influential has been that of Fredric Jameson. *Marxism and Form* in many ways inaugurated the revival of marxist cultural theory, and *The Political Unconscious* (1981), which consists of a long theoretical essay on marxist interpretation and a virtual rewriting of the history of the novel in subsequent chapters, is probably the most debated marxist cultural text of the period. Stanley Aronowitz’s *The Crisis of Historical Materialism*, which engages tendencies in European marxism from the standpoint of American developments in politics and theory, offers an important rethinking of marxism through cultural categories. Bertell Ollman’s *Alienation* (1976) is a major contribution to the elaboration of Marx’s theory. The engagement of marxism with other critical theories is the focus of Michael Ryan’s *Marxism and Deconstruction* (1982), John Fekete’s *The Critical Twilight* (1977), and Frank Lentricchia’s *Criticism...
and Social Change. Cornel West has charted the relationship between marxism and several strands of American thought: Afro-American critical thought, pragmatism, and Christianity. Richard Ohmann’s English in America (1976) stands as a major critique of a central discipline of cultural studies. And though Edward Said’s The World, the Text, and the Critic (1983) stands self-consciously apart from marxism, the “oppositional criticism” and “cultural materialism” it develops both draws on and offers much to contemporary marxists.46

Why Marxism?

Perhaps a simpler way of expressing all this is to say that I have been more influenced by Marxists than by Marxism or by any other ism.

—Edward Said, 198447

A reader may have followed me thus far, and still step back and echo Edward Said. Indeed, some of the writers I have cited do take Said’s position and are reluctant to call themselves “marxists.” Why call oneself a marxist? Why not pragmatic, “American,” and take from marxists what works and leave the rest, including that foreign, “un-American” name? Let me conclude by suggesting some answers.

First, there is a political reason. Though by no means the only tradition of socialist thought, marxism remains the dominant and most developed body of theory and practice in socialist movements. As a result it is an international discourse with an international vocabulary. Spoken in a variety of national and continental accents, it remains, for socialists, a way of avoiding the provincialities of an “American” tradition—“Emersonianism.” Irving Howe dubs it—without ignoring the peculiarities of the United States.

Second, marxism provides a tradition, a paradigm, a “problematic”: a discourse united not by a dogma nor by a set of fixed assumptions, but by a set of questions. In the case of marxism, these are neither eternal philosophical questions nor pragmatic technical questions of efficiency but are questions raised in the last instance by the politics of emancipation, by the need for a critical understanding of the world. Such a problematic is necessary at the present in part to avoid the tyranny of fashion in contemporary theory—who will be theorist to know and cite next year?48—but also because, as the theoretical and historical work of Said and Lentricchia themselves demonstrates, cultural power, even in America, does not lie with parties of one, but in the affiliations, to use Said’s term, an intellectual makes. Despite marxist antinomianism, just as there is no fully “authored” discourse of one, there are no “parties of one.” We are condemned to affiliation.49

Third, marxism does offer one of the few coherent alternatives to the search for an “interdisciplinary method.” The dream of “semiotics” as a master science of signs and the structuralist promise of uniting the disciplines around a common linguistic model have both faded in the face of post-structuralist critiques and the skepticism of historians. “Modernization” theory has made a comeback in American Studies when its life in sociology seemed over, but it remains, with its “traditional”/”modern” dichotomy, more reductive than even Second International marxism. Indeed, precisely because of the economistic reductionism of early versions of the base/superstructure model, marxists are more aware of the dangers of reductionism and essentialism than most other scholars: it is among non-marxists that one finds reductive and essentialist accounts like Marvin Harris’ “cultural materialism,” the appeal to the last instance of demography, and accounts of the “essence” of a nation, race, gender, or period.50

Indeed, marxism now has a number of ways of considering the relationship between culture and society; of showing how “social being determines social consciousness,” of dealing with the issues raised by the metaphor of “base” and “superstructure.”51 We can characterize the four main modes of marxist cultural studies at present by their central concepts: commodity/refixation; ideology; class/hegemony; cultural materialism.

The first is based on Marx’s account of the fetishism of commodities and Lukács’ subsequent elaboration of the theory of reification. The effects of the commodity-form on culture: this lens dominates much of the work of the Frankfurt School and of Fredric Jameson, and finds its particular strengths both in illuminating the inscription of the social on apparently apolitical modernist and postmodernist texts, and in the analysis of the mass-produced formulas of the culture industry.

The second line of work draws on the concept of ideology. As Slotkin recognizes, this is close to the “myth/symbol” approach to American Studies. It analyzes the lineaments and functions of ideologies, as a crucial mediation between texts and institutions. This work has been enriched by the displacement of notions of ideology as a systematic world view or as a false consciousness by recent marxist redefinitions: Louis Althusser’s sense of ideology as a social process of addressing and constituting subjects; Fredric Jameson’s notion of ideology as narrative in form; and Terry Eagleton’s examination of “aesthetic ideologies.”52

The third mode begins from marxist theories of class, and attempts to specify the relations between class and culture. If this had led to occasional reductiveness when applied to individual artists, it has proved indispensable in analyses of working-class cultures: youth subcultures, slave cultures, the impact and uses of mass culture, traditional and invented cultural institutions, and the uses of leisure time. Gramsci’s theoretical framework—“hegemony,” “historical bloc,” “common sense/good sense,” the “national-popular”—have allowed this work to escape both the class reductiveness where, as Nicos
Poulantzas joked, classes wear their cultures like license plates, and the liberal appropriation of "hegemony" as a more sophisticated and more fashionable synonym for "consensus."  

The fourth direction of marxist cultural studies focuses on the material production and consumption of culture. It is exemplified by Raymond Williams' project of "cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism." Williams' attention to the processes of the "selective traditions," to cultural institutions, formations, means of production, and conventions, and to the relationships of "dominant," "residual," "alternative," "oppositional," and "emergent" cultures provides the conceptual frame for such work.  

None of these paradigms exist in isolation from the others; nevertheless, they do indicate tendencies and emphases in contemporary work. The first two tend to be more text-oriented, more "literary-critical"; the latter two tend to engage more in "historical" or "sociological" work. Together they offer a rich and complex approach to cultural studies.  

It is more than a decade since Robert Sklar criticized the poverty of theory in American Studies in these pages; and that poverty is still felt, despite the injection (infection?) of post-structuralism, in the crisis of confidence throughout the beleaguered humanities. Meanwhile, marxist cultural studies have steadily developed. The new American marxism has its weaknesses, deriving, as Edward Said notes, from "the comparative absence of a continuous native Marxist theoretical tradition or culture to back it up and its relative isolation from any concrete political struggle." But to dismiss is as "academic marxism" is to ignore the relative autonomy of cultural work, and to mistake the nature of the "academy" in American society. The post-War Two university is a part of "mass culture," of the "culture industry," a central economic and ideological apparatus of American capitalism. Though right-wing nightmares of a marxist takeover of the humanities seems a little absurd in the reign of Reagan and Bennett, it is worth recalling that, in the development of marxism, it has been in times of political defeat and downturn that theoretical and cultural work have ripened, often at an unavoidable distance from working class struggles. To these labors of reconstructing a critical and emancipatory understanding of American culture, one might eventually say, "well worked, old mole."

NOTES


3On taking the capital out of Marxism: Though Marxism is usually capitalized in style-sheet publications, I follow the increasing, though by no means universal, use of a lowercase marxism that one finds in the journals of the contemporary left. This derives from the sense that marxism is less a doctrine located in the works of Marx than an international tradition of socialist theory and politics with many tendencies and currents. Many, including myself, would prefer another, less proper, name for the tradition, but none has proved as brief and exact. "Historical materialism" is probably the most accepted common name, and readers may substitute it for marxism in this essay if they choose: it remains a mouthful to speak, write, or use as an adjective. "Scientific socialism" still has a too positivist ring in English; "dialectical materialism" has been entirely corrupted by Stalinist ideology. "Critical Theory" remains too closely tied to the Frankfurt paradigm, and in the U. S. is confused with literary speculation. I am partial to the neologism "socio-analysis" coined, I think, by the American socialist Leon Samson (in his The American Mind: A Study in Socio-analysis [New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1932] and recently reinvinted by Robert Heilbroner in Marxism: For And Against (New York: Norton, 1981); however, if I used it consistently, no one would know what I was talking about. The lowercase marxism may also be seen as a distancing from the official Marxism-Leninisms of the postcapitalist regimes. Many dissident marxists have used terms like "revisionist," "Marxist-humanist," "critical Marxist," or "neo-Marxist" to characterize themselves, the lowering of socialism, communism, and marxism derives from a similar motive.


In a culture where marxism has always been a minority current, often excluded and consistently misrepresented by the liberal disciplines, there is a temptation to begin any discussion of "marxism and ..." with an account of what marxism is. I will resist, though my conclusion will outline the main modes of marxist cultural studies. On marxism generally, I recommend Robert Heilbroner's excellent and concise introduction, Marxism: For and Against. He finds four central concerns that run through the great variety of competing and sometimes incompatible marxists and that justly talking about marxism as an entity: a dialectical approach to thought; a materialist conception of history; the "socioanalysis" of capitalism (that is, the critique of political economy); and a commitment to socialist transformation. For discussions of specific marxist concepts, see Tom Bottomore, ed., A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983).


4For introductions, see Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism (London: Verso/NLB, 1976), and Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

social history, and the history of Marxist thought itself. It has nevertheless failed to develop a distinctive, persuasive critique of American culture comparable to the work of Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s in the European context.” Norman Cantor, “The real crisis in the humanities today,” New Criterion, 3 (June 1985), 32.


F. O. Matthiessen, The Responsibilities of the Critic (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), 184-99. On Matthiessen, see the memorial issue of Monthly Review, 2 (Oct. 1950); Jonathan Arac, “F. O. Matthiessen, Authorizing an American Renaissance,” in W. B. Michaels and D. Pease, eds., American Renaissance Reconsidered (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985); and Leo Marx, “Double Consciousness and the Cultural Politics of F. O. Matthiessen,” Book Review, 34 (Feb. 1983), 34-56, which has a fine discussion of Matthiessen’s relation to marxism. Marx accurately notes that “in retrospect Matthiessen’s rejection of what he took to be Marxism is ironic… Some of today’s practicing Marxist critics, Raymond Williams for example, would consider Matthiessen’s literary theory… to be more acceptable—closer to their own theories—than the rigid classification of Marxism that Matthiessen found repugnant. The overall tendency of Marxist thought during the last twenty years has been to move toward a more thoroughgoing historical critique of ideas and material culture than was allowed by the mainstream Marxism of the Stalin era. It is this development which now makes Matthiessen’s thought seem less distant from Marxism than he himself believed it to be.” (48).

For an example of the union of the New Left and this critical American Studies, see Charles Newman and George Abbott White, eds., Literature in Revolution (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), which included essays by New Left activists (Carl Oglesby on Melville, Todd Gitlin on TV, and Paul Buhle on comics), an essay on Matthiessen, and essays by Leo Marx and Raymond Williams.


“Michael Green notes of ‘cultural studies’ that it “has thus not become a new form of ‘discipline’. Attempts to ‘unify’ the field as the analysis of signifying practices… are premature or unsatisfactory… Equally, the notion of ‘interdisciplinarity’ no longer seems as forceful—not so much because marxism itself has suspended its ambition (though that is substantially true) but because ‘specialist skills’ do not just lie ready to collaborate together. The relation of cultural studies to the other disciplines is rather one of critique: of their historical construction, of their claims, of their omissions, and particularly of the forms of their separation. At the same time, a critical relationship to the disciplines is also a critical stance to their forms of knowledge production—the prevalent social relations of research, the labor process of higher education. Green notes that “The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (in Peter Widdowson, Reading English (London: Methuen, 1982). See Stuart Hall et al., Culture, Language, Media (London: Hutchinson, 1980) for a history of British cultural studies and a selection of work from the journal Working Papers in Cultural Studies, and Stuart Hall et al., Policing the Crisis (London: Macmillan, 1978). See also the collective volumes by members of the Center (all London: Hutchinson): Resistance through Rituals (1976); On Ideology (1978); Women Take Issue (1978); Working Class Culture (1979); Unpopular Education (1981); The Empire Strikes Back (1982); Making Histories (1982).


“One might, crudely distinguish four marxists of the last half century: the state ideologies of the post-capitalist societies; the “eastern marxists” which critically interrogate the historical experience of those societies, from Kollontai, Trotsky, and the circle of Bakhtin, to Bahro and Medvedev’s marxists;” which have theorized imperialism, colonialism, and the relations between national liberation and socialist transformation, from the early Mao Zedong and José Carlos Mariategui to C. L. R. James and Amilcar Cabral; and the “western marxists” which I draw on in this essay which have since Luxembourg, Gramsci and Lukács addressed the resilience of the advanced capitalist nations, particularly in culture and ideology. Louis Hartz, The Founding of New Societies (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 6; see also idem, The Liberal Tradition in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1965), 254n. On European marxist views of the U.S., see Lipset, “Why no Socialism?” R. Laurence Moore, European Socialists and the American Promised Land (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970); Marx and Engels on the United States (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979).

Hartz, Liberal Tradition, 252.

In what follows I will be surveying the marxist scholarship of the last quarter century. Two qualifications are necessary. First, for a variety of reasons, including the recurrent “red scares” in the American academy and the dissuasion of the American left, there is no sure litmus test for “marxist” scholarship. I have based this survey neither on party affiliation nor on political activity; rather I have cited work which either calls itself “marxist,” is predominately influenced by leading marxist theorists, or uses marxist categories and a materialist conception of history. I am more interested in sending the reader to this work than in precise labels. If people feel that they have been misidentified as marxists, or have been excluded, please write to me. Second, my focus on the last quarter century is a result of a sense that, as Ronald Aronson has noted, though “the two earlier heydays of American Left activity—centered on the pre-War I Socialist Party and the Communist Party of the 1930s—were virtually barren of Marxist culture… the New Left has led to the first significant intellectual advances for an American Marxism,” Ronald Aronson, “Historical Materialism,” New Left Review, #152 (July/August 1985), 79. For the history of early American marxists, see David Herreshoff, The Origins of American Marxism (New York: Monad Press, 1973); Oakley Johnson, Marxism in United States History Before the Russian Revolution (New York: Humanities Press, 1974); the still indispensable Donald Dan Fogel and Stow Persons, eds., Socialism and American Life, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1925); Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism (London: Zed Press, 1983); and Stanley Aronowitz, “Culture and Politics,” in his The Crisis of Historical Materialism (New York: Praeger, 1981). For


13Susan, Culture as History, 41. For the mode of production debate, see Radical History Review (Winter 1977), #18 (Fall 1978), #22 (Winter 1979-1980).


15Though I am focusing on culture in this essay, it is important to note that for marxists, "Americanism" signifies not only the mass consumer culture, but also the reconstruction of the labor process on "Taylorist" and "Fordist" principles. So the studies of the capitalist reshaping of technology and the labor process by Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); David Noble, America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977); David Montgomery, Workers' Control in America (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979); and Michael Burawoy, The Politics of Production (London: Verso, 1985), among others, are essential for American cultural studies.


THE FAMILY, THE STATE, AND THE NOVEL IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

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This essay has a double purpose: on the one hand, I want to set out some of the central concerns involving the practices of the state and the family, and the institution of the novel in the early republic, a period roughly defined here as between the American Revolution and the Civil War; on the other, I want to show how these concerns have been re-examined but also replicated by recent literary and social historians working on the early republic. I am particularly interested in what has been called the new historicism and its effects on the study of the literature of the period. Focusing on the complicated relations among women and politics, the family and the state, and the home and the world, I want to proceed by looking at how these relations are thematized in some typical and resonant passages in the literature, and to move then to a more general consideration of the links between the literature and politics of the period.¹

* * *

Nineteenth-century readers, according to an anonymous reviewer for the Knickerbocker in 1858, felt that the novel was "at home in the home's heart, with the children and the women": I want to suggest that exploring the place of the novel in this regard may be central to understanding the place of women and the family in the early republic.² I want particularly to consider here how the very difference maintained between "the home" and "the world" in early nineteenth-century domestic fiction might make the home a functioning part of that sphere to which it seems to be opposed. If, as certain writers of the period suggest, the home already incorporates, for instance, the role of government, the notion of separate spheres may be seen to keep the difference functional.

In 1834, the American novelist Susan Ridley Sedgwick wrote that "it has indeed often been observed by foreigners, with some surprise, that females here are remarkably absent from the care of the public weal; that they either know nothing or care little about subjects connected with it." While "foreigners" may express surprise about finding women "absent from the care of the public weal," what today's readers may find more surprising is that such an absence, in the nineteenth-century domestic novel which presumably encouraged it, should excite comment. Sedgwick's explanation looks at first like that of the early