



**The Problem of an American Studies "Philosophy": A Bibliography of New Directions**

Robert Sklar

*American Quarterly*, Volume 27, Issue 3 (Aug., 1975), 245-262.

---

Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>, by contacting JSTOR at [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu), or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*American Quarterly* is published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/jhup.html>.

---

*American Quarterly*  
©1975 Johns Hopkins University Press

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu).

©2000 JSTOR

# THE PROBLEM OF AN AMERICAN STUDIES "PHILOSOPHY": A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF NEW DIRECTIONS

ROBERT SKLAR  
*University of Michigan*

MY MANDATE IS TO WRITE A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY ON "THE PHILOSOPHY of American Studies" in the 1970s. The assignment brings to mind an old story about an 18th century guidebook to Iceland. Aspiring to a complete taxonomy, it listed all species a thorough guidebook ought to have, regardless of their status in Iceland. Under the entry for turtles, the guidebook stated, "There are no turtles in Iceland." Perhaps under the entry for philosophy the American Studies guidebook should be just as parsimonious. Few practitioners believe American Studies possesses a philosophy, in the dictionary sense of coherent principles underlying the pursuit of knowledge, and many prefer it that way, contending that an anti-philosophy of "hanging loose" best represents their ethos and tactics.<sup>1</sup> Two leading American Studies scholars, both members of American Studies departments, published significant works on the philosophy of scholarly inquiry in the early 1970s—and both addressed their concern to the philosophy of *history*, with hardly a glance at "American Studies."<sup>2</sup>

Yet if most American Studies scholars are loathe to examine the dominant forms and procedures of their field, its critics have no such reluctance. American Studies stands accused of practicing a philosophy of elitism—excluding the popular, the contemporary and the non-literary in favor of a narrow, old-fashioned "high" culture bias. And the force of this

<sup>1</sup>"MASA Bulletin," *American Studies*, 15 (Spring 1974), 103-04, and David E. Stannard, "Editor's Introduction," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Dec. 1974), 445-47, are two recent reiterations of American Studies anti-philosophy.

<sup>2</sup>Murray G. Murphey, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), and Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1973).

attack has come not from cultural or political revolutionaries nor racial or ethnic minorities, but predominantly from white middle-class male academics who need to identify an American Studies philosophy that they hope to supplant with—their own anti-philosophical style of “hanging loose.”<sup>3</sup>

The image of American Studies engendered by its critics often belongs more to the realm of academic psychodrama than to rational dispute over scholarly principles. At a meeting of the Popular Culture Association several years ago the choice of scholarly allegiance was explained by polarities of personal style: American Studies is clean-shaven, Popular Culture hirsute; American Studies wears ties, Popular Culture turtlenecks; American Studies drinks whiskey, Popular Culture smokes dope; American Studies has had its time in the sun, Popular Culture's day is dawning.<sup>4</sup> Behind the pathos of such sentiments lie the social circumstances of university life in the 1960s—the rapid expansion of institutions and faculties, the heightened sense of an Establishment and of boundaries between academic castes—which deserve study within the framework of a sociology of higher education.

But behind such sentiments, and often obscured by them, lies a development far more important: a number of fields of historical and cultural scholarship on the United States have newly emerged in the past half-decade with a primary focus on the study of non-elites. This new emphasis is not likely to fade like a late-blooming flower of the 1960s; rather it forms the basis of serious and systematic efforts in a number of specialties—among them popular culture, oral history, urban anthropology, women's studies and quantitative social history—to articulate coherent sets of principles and procedures that are already reshaping the study of American culture and society. My aim in this essay is to suggest how new approaches to the study of non-elites are leading toward a reformulation of theories and methods of cultural studies, with profound implications for “the philosophy of American Studies”; to indicate some ways that the parent fields of American Studies, intellectual history and literary criticism, are responding to this major shift; to show how American Studies procedures are being challenged or influenced by these new directions; and finally to propose some essential tasks for American Studies scholarship, that the ever-elusive, ever-imminent “philosophy of American Studies” may play an

<sup>3</sup>“Perhaps, at this point, a loose and fluid definition, with no restrictions imposed against expansion, is best.” Ray B. Browne, ed., headnote, in his *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness* (New York: Wiley, 1973), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>These views were expressed at a session on American Studies and Popular Culture, PCA national meeting, Indianapolis, April, 1973.

effective role in the future construction of knowledge about American culture and society.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Study of Non-Elites*

Of all the new fields concentrating on non-elites, popular culture is likely to be most familiar to American Studies practitioners, some of whom have made significant contributions to the subject. In recent years, however, a movement toward a separate popular culture discipline has been fostered by the Popular Culture Association, which was founded at an ASA national meeting in 1969, and by the Center for the Study of Popular Culture at Bowling Green, Ohio, which publishes three journals and occasional monographs on the field. So far Popular Culture—I adopt the practice of capitalizing the field when referring to its Bowling Green practitioners—has had little, if any, more success than American Studies in overcoming the vagueness of its pronouncements about what it is and does.

In his anthology on the field, *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness*, Ray B. Browne defines Popular Culture both negatively and positively: "... Popular Culture is all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media . . . Popular Culture—by which is meant, roughly, all the experiences in life shared by people in common, generally though not necessarily disseminated by the mass media. . . ."<sup>6</sup> The latter definition, more recent in time, offers the beginning of a hypothesis that can be rationally tested.

"All the experiences in life shared by people in common," for example, immediately brings to mind the universal human experiences of birth and death. Does Popular Culture study the various practices and beliefs in American society associated with being born and dying? Does it compare and contrast those associated with different ethnic, racial, religious, regional and class groups? Or does its interest in birth and death focus more directly on Maude's abortion and *Brian's Song*? Perhaps the operative words in the definitions above, since they are repeated, are "disseminated by the mass media."

In fact nearly all Popular Culture scholarship deals with the popular arts. Russel Nye explicitly describes his pioneering survey, *The Unembarrassed Muse*, as "a historical study of certain American popular arts, the arts of

<sup>5</sup>It should be clear that this essay is not "definitive," and the author would welcome suggestions from readers about useful works he has overlooked.

<sup>6</sup>Browne, *Popular Culture*, pp. 22, 6.

commercial entertainment.<sup>7</sup> Other important scholars in the field, such as John G. Cawelti, function essentially as critics and aesthetic theorists: even when they interchangeably use the terms "popular culture" and "popular arts," their focus is on aesthetic products (films, novels, etc.) and the people who create them.<sup>8</sup> Thus the underlying principles and procedures of Popular Culture studies have not been to study "the culture(s) of the people," but rather the arts and entertainments disseminated with the aim of reaching a large audience and earning a profit.<sup>9</sup>

If Popular Culture were to reflect this fact in its nomenclature, and rename itself a field for the study of popular arts (where there already exists a considerable body of literature),<sup>10</sup> it would make clear that its procedures are much less different from those in American Studies than is sometimes claimed. Cawelti's valuable studies on formula in the popular arts, for example, have close affinities with Leo Marx's discussion of the literary convention of pastoral in *The Machine in the Garden*.<sup>11</sup> Studies of individual creators in the popular arts are interested in style, form, meaning, intention in much the same manner as American Studies scholarship on individual creators. Indeed the rhetoric of Popular Culture does call for an *expansion* of consciousness or sensibility on the part of critics, rather than transformation to a new sensibility.

Still, the terms elite and non-elite remain as categories, yet they begin to muddle when we see the circumstances of individual workers in the popular arts. Motion picture directors, favorite topics for Popular Culture scholars, have been among the highest salaried employees in the country; in 1937 and 1938 at least a dozen directors earned more than \$100,000 a year.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to escape defining movies as a popular art created by an elite—a category which the Popular Culture polarities seem unable to encompass.

It is not that one demands premature closure on definitions in the field, but one desires that the definitional questions be asked. We need a Lovejoyian precision in defining the various meanings of "popular"—something intended for mass dissemination, something not so intended but which

<sup>7</sup>Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial, 1970), Preface.

<sup>8</sup>John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, n.d.); Cawelti, "Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Popular Culture" and "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture," in Browne, *Popular Culture*, pp. 45-59, 109-19.

<sup>9</sup>This is not to depreciate such studies; the author has worked for a number of years in this field. See Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of the American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975).

<sup>10</sup>For bibliography see Irving Deer and Harriet A. Deer, *The Popular Arts: A Critical Reader* (New York: Scribner's, 1967).

<sup>11</sup>Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford, 1964).

<sup>12</sup>Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), pp. 383-84.

achieves it, and so on.<sup>13</sup> In addition to concentrating on products and creators, we need further study of audiences, the way the popular arts are received and used, and how they are produced. Above all we need direct exploration of a central question: what are the relationships between the popular arts and "the experiences in life shared by people in common"? Perhaps then the word *culture* would begin to take on its proper meaning in the study of the people's culture.

Popular culture is not only the preserve of a separate discipline—no more than American Studies encompasses all the scholarship on United States culture and society—and in other fields three recent studies, all on 19th century popular culture, do focus in varying degrees on the relation of product and audience. Of the three, John L. Fell's *Film and the Narrative Tradition* concentrates most extensively on formal elements in the popular arts.<sup>14</sup> Fell's book is significant for its ability to transcend the artificial elite culture/popular culture dichotomy, simply by ignoring it, for his theme is the way certain narrative forms pervade all aspects of the arts and entertainment, and his critical acumen ranges in a remarkably broad fashion over melodrama, the dime novel, prose style in the Victorian novel, the comics, stereograph cards, advertising, chromolithographs, photography, painting and other aspects of cultural expression.

His own narrative, however, has an unfortunate reversed chronological form, taking the invention of motion pictures at the end of the 19th century as his central subject and casting backward into preceding decades in search of anticipations of the movies. This ahistorical strategy does not provide an opportunity for Fell to develop some of his useful suggestions about the links between narrative modes and broader developments in cultural life—the increasing tempo in art forms as a reflection of the pace of society, the connection between simultaneous occurrence as an aspect of technology and also of the visual arts, the role of technology itself (as in the invention of lenses and the rotary press) in impelling developments in the arts.

The connection between narrative forms and social structure is more directly the theme of Robert C. Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*.<sup>15</sup> Toll is explicitly concerned with the methodological problems in using the content of the popular arts as evidence of popular attitudes—rather than making the unexamined assump-

<sup>13</sup>Michelle Herwald, in a dissertation-in-progress on science fiction magazines in the United States between the world wars, gives six definitions of "popular": 1) Intended for the general masses; 2) Adapted to ordinary intelligence; 3) Adapted to ordinary taste; 4) Based on or alleged to be based upon the will of the people; 5) Regarded with favor or approval by the people; 6) Suited to the financial means of the public.

<sup>14</sup>John L. Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

<sup>15</sup>Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974).

tion, as often seems the case, "that popular culture accurately reflects popular thought."<sup>16</sup>

After a careful exploration of the influence of audience response on the development of popular theater, Toll argues that the minstrel show, with white actors performing in blackface stereotypes, had, of all forms of popular theater, the most intimate ties with a working class audience; thus the changing content and style of minstrel shows and songs has social meaning as a reflection of changes in popular values. This interesting thesis, emphasizing as it does the interaction of performers and audience, seems to me to give insufficient weight to the role of ownership and management of minstrel troupes in shaping content. Does political partisanship in the songs, for example, cater to audience preference or express that of backstage managers?

Several of these issues are further clarified in Neil Harris's *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*, a study of the nineteenth century's most famous entertainment entrepreneur.<sup>17</sup> Harris makes clear an essential point about American popular arts and entertainment, that the manager-producer often has a more decisive voice in forming the cultural product than the writer, director or performer. Barnum produced many kinds of entertainment during his long career, from his museum of curiosities to the circus, from Tom Thumb to Jenny Lind, but his basic role, Harris suggests, was as a kind of trickster who engaged his audience in a dialogue of wits about the nature of reality.

Harris calls this central aspect of Barnum's productions "the operational aesthetic," and demonstrates its broader relevance for the development of popular culture in a democratic society: the public's fascination with the process of fakery was an exercise in learning how to know the real, in developing standards of belief. Harris's concept of an "operational aesthetic" is a valuable idea which lifts the discussion of the relation between narrative form and social form in popular arts to a new plane, suggesting that the forms of popular entertainments are constructs blending fantasy and reality, social purpose and commercial motive, requiring study in a full social, cultural and economic context.

Another major new approach to the study of non-elites, the method of quantification, poses an even more direct challenge to traditional American Studies procedures than does popular culture. Insofar as American Studies or popular culture studies practitioners attempt to generalize about American culture and society as a whole, they do so based on a small number of documents produced by the *articulate*—those who consciously communicate their views, no matter what their professional or social class.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

The quantifier reaches beyond this evidence to the statistics produced by actual social behavior. "By showing how sparse records dealing with thousands of individuals can be handled," Richard Jensen writes, "the quantifier has opened the study of the inarticulate to scholars who once could deal only with verbose or introspective elites."<sup>18</sup> From Jensen's assumption that only the elite are articulate, it is evident that the quantifiers' critique of American Studies repeats the same charge of elitism, and the same high emotions, as the argument put forward by Popular Culture advocates.

A full discussion by Jensen of recent bibliography and trends in quantitative studies appeared in this journal a year ago, and need not be re-summarized here. For American Studies scholars, however, perhaps the most significant point in Jensen's article is his assertion concerning the role of quantification in the study of consciousness. "One of the achievements of quantification," he writes, "has been to demonstrate that motivations can be deduced from numbers, and that literary sources to the contrary were misleading, probably deliberately so."<sup>19</sup> Jensen's brief elaboration of this point, centering on analysis of electoral behavior, proclaims the "triumph of quantification over conventional wisdom," but what his language actually suggests is that statistical study of election returns, buttressed by traditional cultural and social evidence about the nature of the electorate, produced more accurate analyses of the returns than contemporary partisans were able to attain.<sup>20</sup> For the sake of the scholarly enterprise, one should hope so.

This tendency to excess in the claims for new methodologies obscures the way new techniques and insights in historical and cultural studies unite with the old to expand and deepen our knowledge of the past—unlike the more complete paradigm changes in the natural and physical sciences that Thomas Kuhn describes.<sup>21</sup> Quantitative techniques and the amassing of new data on non-elite behavior make it much more difficult for scholars to generalize about social life based on the written evidence of outside observers. At the same time there is considerable potential for bias in data collection as well. Numbers, moreover, by themselves say little. They need to be interpreted within a broad context of social and cultural behavior and values gleaned from written sources. The furor over the magical properties of numbers continues—the debate over the historical validity of Robert William Fogel's and Stanley L. Engerman's *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* is the most recent example—but

<sup>18</sup>Richard Jensen, "Quantitative American Studies: The State of the Art," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Aug. 1974), 226.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).

scholars in the fields of social and even cultural history are increasingly amalgamating quantitative and written evidence, using each where it is most effective, to ask new questions about the interrelationships of behavior and values.<sup>22</sup>

Nowhere has this necessity of connecting quantitative and written documentation been more significantly demonstrated than in the new field of women's studies. In a sense the study of women requires both kinds of evidence to recover the subject from its traditional neglect: the written material for women's consciousness in the past, the quantitative for those experiences of women which are not otherwise recorded, for the behavior of the great majority of women who were non-elite. In its brief existence women's studies has already had an enormous impact on scholarly theories and methods, focusing attention on gender as a form of social and cultural distinction and illuminating ways that gender-based ideologies and practices interpenetrated and sometimes supplanted those more familiar to scholarly inquiry, like those of class, region or ethnic origin.<sup>23</sup>

Labor history provides another prominent instance of the way quantitative and written evidence have been brought together to expand the study of non-elites. In recent years some scholars have redefined the field as the history of the working class. Traditional labor history, they suggest, focused too narrowly on labor unions as institutions, excluding from their frame of reference the majority of workers who were not unionized. By utilizing census data and written records like newspapers and the accounts of contemporary observers, historians of the working class aim at depicting the social circumstances and cultural life of working people in the American past. Herbert G. Gutman's article, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," presents the methodological foundation, relevant bibliography and a historical hypothesis for this new perspective.<sup>24</sup>

Historians of women and the working class, along with some American Studies scholars, have increasingly derived their broad concepts of culture not from traditional Arnoldian definitions but from models and explanations in anthropology. One obvious difficulty of this generally fruitful borrowing lies in the fact that anthropologists typically study small pre-in-

<sup>22</sup>Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). A nearly book-length critique of the book is Herbert G. Gutman, "The World Two Cliometricians Made," *Journal of Negro History*, 60 (Jan. 1975), 53-227.

<sup>23</sup>An introduction to research in women's studies may be found in Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>24</sup>Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, 78 (June 1973), 531-88. See also *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Summer 1974), articles drawn from a 1973 Anglo-American history conference.

dustrial societies, and have not themselves often tested their theories in the framework of heterogeneous modern societies.

In recent years, however, a number of American anthropologists have turned their attention to their own society and culture, and a useful gathering of their work is an anthology edited by Joseph G. Jorgensen and Marcello Truzzi, *Anthropology and American Life*, containing examples of both ethnological and ethnographic methods applied to such subjects as kinship, language, religion, social organization and acculturation in the past and present United States. "Anthropology," the editors write, "has a long way to go in constructing theories of American culture based on anthropological models."<sup>25</sup> But Jorgensen and Truzzi do make clear that, although in a world perspective anthropologists have emphasized the study of "the least powerful people," the aim of an anthropology of the United States should be to include both non-elites and elites within a more comprehensive explanatory model.<sup>26</sup>

The method of oral history, on the other hand, has been shifting away from an emphasis on the most powerful—the collecting of oral evidence from important personages, as exemplified by the Columbia University Oral History Research Project—increasingly to document the lives of non-elites. Inspired by Studs Terkel's three volumes of oral interviews—*Division Street: America*; *Hard Times*; and *Working*—which range across the spectrum of social strata, and such community oral histories as Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village*, researchers utilizing new audio-recording technology have shown that classifications like "inarticulate" are relative, bound by class, time and the limitations of a writing and printing medium.<sup>27</sup> Recent works like Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* and Kathy Kahn's *Hillbilly Women* put into the permanent record the voices and lives of non-elites in a way no historical method had previously been able to do—and the growing availability of film and videotape will expand such documents into more complete dimensions.<sup>28</sup>

The dramatic impact of transcripts, tapes and visual documents forces questions of method and theory more insistently to the surface of scholarly consciousness than do similar efforts to grasp the experience of non-elites

<sup>25</sup>Joseph G. Jorgensen and Marcello Truzzi, editors, *Anthropology and American Life* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup>Studs Terkel, *Division Street: America* (New York: Pantheon, 1967); *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).

<sup>28</sup>Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Kathy Kahn, *Hillbilly Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

through such approaches as popular culture studies or quantitative social history. How is oral testimony to be interpreted in the absence of written evidence, or in conflict with it? How do the interviewer's role and questions shape the oral document? Such issues as these are raised in a valuable essay by Ronald J. Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in a volume of essays Grele has edited on the subject.<sup>29</sup>

The task of the oral historian, Grele suggests, is to understand the function of ideology in the dynamics of cultural behavior, in order "... to see our interviewees as bearers of a culture and thus people with their own view of the past, be it formed as part of a hegemonic ideology, or in opposition to that ideology, or as some combination of myth and ideology, or even a secret history. . . . Our aim is to bring to conscious articulation the ideological problematic of the interviewee, to reveal the cultural context in which information is being conveyed, and to thus transform an individual story into a cultural narrative, and, thereby, to more fully understand what happened in the past."<sup>30</sup>

No document, in short, be it oral testimony, a popular entertainment product, a table of statistical data, can be fully understood until it is placed within the broad and complex context of its culture. And the significant task of documenting and interpreting the nature of cultural contexts is one which American Studies practitioners have traditionally claimed as their central purpose. In a rational ordering of scholarly priorities, American Studies specialists belong at the forefront of the effort to study the social and cultural circumstances of non-elites.

### *Intellectual History and Literary Criticism*

But such a rational ordering may not be easy to accomplish. American Studies, as we have seen, is widely regarded as a field devoted to the study of elites, and such an assumption is not entirely without cause. For most of the past quarter century the scholarly pillars of American Studies have been intellectual history and literary criticism, and both of these fields have concentrated on the products of a small group of thinkers and writers. The prominence of these fields was founded on their assertion that the study of intellectual and cultural elites provided deeper insights into the culture as a whole than other scholarly methods—that the history of intellectual and imaginative productions *was* the history of American culture. As this conviction has come under increasing criticism, no alternative set of principles and procedures has yet emerged in American Studies that seems to provide

<sup>29</sup>Ronald J. Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound* (Chicago: Precedent, 1975). See also Grele's essay in this issue.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

an effective approach to a comprehensive cultural analysis. This decline of old theories, without their replacement by new ones, accounts for the absence of a coherent American Studies "philosophy."

Both intellectual history and literary criticism, however, show signs of re-considering their perspectives in the light of recent scholarly developments. At a session on "United States Intellectual History: A Post-Mortem?" at the December, 1974, AHA meeting, two of the three panelists, Daniel Calhoun and David Hall, sought to outline methods that could revitalize intellectual history as a field studying society as a whole.

Hall proposed that the concept of "ideas" be replaced in intellectual history discourse by such terms as "language," "paradigm" and "ritual" as active concepts, with direct application to behavior and the formation of social codes. Recent work by the British educational psychologist Basil Bernstein and the anthropologist Mary Douglas provides new models for the study of language and symbol systems as embodiments of social systems.<sup>31</sup> In her book *Natural Symbols* Douglas postulates a classificatory scheme based on "grid and group" that proposes systematically to root thought and belief systems within social structure. "We should be able to say," she writes, "what kinds of universe are likely to be constructed when social relations take this or that form."<sup>32</sup>

Drawing on these same models, Calhoun suggested the possibility of studying intellectual activity within a framework of class structure. His aim was an "open-minded history of working-class thought," but he recognized the difficulty of grasping the patterns in the unarticulated experience of non-elites. Scholars, he said, would have to overcome this problem by a "complex interplay of syncretism and analysis."<sup>33</sup>

Calhoun has made such an effort in *The Intelligence of a People*, an attempt to grasp the nature of general intelligence in the population at large during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by studying transformations in education and in such modes of expression as preaching, ship-building and bridge-building.<sup>34</sup> Calhoun's work has been defined, however, as cultural rather than intellectual history, and such a distinction usefully puts it in a different category from such other recent works as Wilson Carey McWilliams's *The Idea of Fraternity in America* and Rush Welter's *The Mind of America: 1820-1860*.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol. I, *Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971); Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

<sup>32</sup>Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup>Daniel Calhoun, untitled paper, AHA meeting, December, 1974.

<sup>34</sup>Daniel Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).

<sup>35</sup>Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1973); Rush Welter, *The Mind of America: 1820-1860* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975).

McWilliams's book is an example of traditional intellectual history, the history of an idea through the critique of an articulate elite of intellectuals. Welter's book represents one kind of a break from the tradition, seeking to study the content of social themes as they are expressed "in the published statements of relatively ordinary men and women."<sup>36</sup> But Welter's approach does not attempt to explore the social context of such "ordinary" intellectual production. Perhaps the tasks of intellectual history and cultural history need to be more clearly delineated—this was the underlying premise of the third AHA panelist, Donald Meyer, who defined intellectual history as the study of "high-level theory generated by high-level theorists."<sup>37</sup> Intellectual history would be a counterpart of philosophy, biography, political theory; a new kind of cultural history would explore the modes of linking consciousness and behavior, expression and social structure.

In the field of literary criticism, however, dividing the labor in the foregoing manner would clearly be less desirable. Literary studies have indeed had such a division, and in recent years scholars of literature have begun to seek ways to unify what the canons of New Criticism had kept apart: the work itself, and the society in which it was created. This presents a formidable task—to expand the New Critical perspective which too narrowly focused on individual texts, without diluting its high standards of close textual reading.

In a lucid brief overview of the past generation of American criticism, Wystan Curnow makes the point that "works of literature are made up of features, but they are made *by* purposes," and he suggests that full access to American literature will not be gained by the New Critical method unless "it extends its respect for the object to a respect for its being an object of a time and a place."<sup>38</sup> Curnow calls for a criticism that is both epistemological and historical; as models he cites the works of Morse Peckham and J. Hillis Miller on nineteenth century English literature.<sup>39</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, in his foreword to Harry B. Henderson III's *Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction*, adds George Lukács, Lucien Goldmann and Kenneth Burke as critics who influenced Henderson's effort to explore the links between knowledge and history.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Welter, *The Mind of America*, p. viii.

<sup>37</sup>Donald Meyer, untitled paper, AHA meeting, December, 1974.

<sup>38</sup>Wystan Curnow, "Romanticism and Modern American Criticism," *Studies in Romanticism*, 12 (Fall 1973), 799.

<sup>39</sup>Representative works are Morse Peckham, *Beyond the Tragic Vision* (New York: Braziller, 1962) and J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966).

<sup>40</sup>Alan Trachtenberg, foreword, in Harry B. Henderson, *Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. ix. See Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (New York:

Still, there is as yet no new model that focuses directly on American material. Henderson's important book applies traditional critical methods and makes historical consciousness its central theme. A valuable essay by George Abbott White focuses on a past effort to forge a unity of aesthetic and historical perspectives in F. O. Matthiessen's classic *American Renaissance*.<sup>41</sup> The writings of Curnow, Henderson, White and others make clear that the critique of traditional methods has now been fully stated. In literary criticism, as in intellectual and cultural history, and in the new fields studying non-elites, there has not been so propitious a time for more than a generation, not merely to pay lip service to interdisciplinary approaches, but to do the serious work of exploring and testing interdisciplinary theories and methods.

### *American Studies*

Popular culture, quantitative social history, women's studies, working-class history, urban anthropology, oral history, intellectual history, literary criticism—all stand in need of systematic understanding of the larger social and cultural patterns, structures, systems within which their discrete subjects take their form. There is every logical reason why American Studies as a distinctive scholarly frame of reference should play a primary role in helping to achieve a systematic grasp on the organizing principles of American culture and society. American Studies practitioners are trained in several specialties; they are taught to look for links, similarities, threads connecting the whole. But there are serious impediments that make it problematic for American Studies to fulfill such a leadership role on an intellectual and theoretical level, however useful the field may be as a pedagogical and administrative facilitator.

These impediments are three: 1) The scholarly legacy which, as we have seen, renders the field vulnerable to the charge of elitism and thus of irrelevance to non-elite studies; 2) The difficulties of constructing adequate theories and methods for the study of cultural and social structures, and the paucity of useful models within the traditional framework of American Studies scholarship; and 3) An apparently strong antipathy among some sectors of the American Studies field toward efforts to move beyond indi-

---

Vintage Books, 1941, 1957); and, in translation, George Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), and Lucien Goldmann, "Criticism and Dogmatism in Literature," in David Cooper, ed., *The Dialectics of Liberation* (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 128-49.

<sup>41</sup>George Abbott White, "Ideology and Literature: *American Renaissance* and F. O. Matthiessen," in White and Charles Newman, editors, *Literature in Revolution* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 430-500.

vidualistic, idiosyncratic and impressionistic modes of scholarly procedure—toward articulating a set (or sets) of coherent principles, in short, to the goal of clarifying an “American Studies philosophy.” Let us consider each of these impediments in turn.

The scholarly legacy of traditional American Studies, first of all, needs to be understood in the framework of an entire generation’s historical and cultural scholarship after World War II. Seen in this light, it is inaccurate to call American Studies elitist if one means anti-popular; rather it was elitist because its reigning philosophy, overt or covert, was essentially “modernist.” Like the modernist generation of literary artists who preceded them, the scholars of the 1950s and 1960s excelled, to adapt a phrase from the poet Louis Zukofsky, at constructing scholarly mechanisms for analysing the movements of individual brains. The individual text, the individual career—these are what scholars thought were important and felt confident of their capacity to elucidate.

The inability of American historical and cultural scholarship to maintain social systems within the boundaries of its frame undoubtedly derives from the larger ideological context of the Cold War years, and deserves study in its own right—the ideology of the End of Ideology. What is significant about American Studies, however, is the way it strained to stretch modernist methods over a wider area than they could encompass—to make individual texts and careers “stand for” general experience in the larger culture and society. American Studies never tried to push the non-elite outside its purview; but it was also unable adequately to make the connection between individual works and the society as a whole. This is made abundantly clear by recent critiques of the dominant myth and symbol (or “humanist”) orientation by Bruce Kuklick, in his article, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” and by Cecil F. Tate in *The Search for a Method in American Studies*.<sup>42</sup>

In their own time, nevertheless, the myth and symbol studies were recognized as important by specialists in fields other than American Studies because they did attempt to link text and context, product and society. And it is clear that many of the recent critics of traditional American Studies have so far been no more successful at constructing adequate theories on the relation between values, beliefs, attitudes and imaginative constructs, on the one hand, and social structure and forms on the other. While some may be content with the present state of theoretical and “philosophical” vacuity, it should be remembered that the absence of theoretical rigor, no less than its practice, has consequences.

<sup>42</sup>Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, 24 (Oct. 1972), 435–50; Cecil F. Tate, *The Search for a Method in American Studies* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1973).

One such consequence has been the calling into question of a central tenet of American Studies procedures, the concept of culture itself. In "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., associates the culture concept with the "consensus" historiography of the Cold War period (and its social science counterparts) and suggests that in achieving a more comprehensive and systematic historical methodology than traditional American Studies and intellectual history we may need to discard the culture concept completely.<sup>43</sup> This is indeed a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, as the sociologist Louis Schneider remarks in his response to Berkhofer: ". . . even if historians have in fact been misled by various notions pertaining to 'culture,' it seems clear that in principle the central concept as such should not be made to bear the burden of a theory of history and society. To wish to throw it out because it cannot bear such a burden would surely also be mistaken."<sup>44</sup>

There is no justification for discarding a concept because previous practitioners have defined and applied it in ways that no longer seem adequate. But it is one thing to rescue the culture concept from traditional American Studies, another to give it new life. That American Studies scholars have found it so difficult critically and systematically to analyse concepts of culture, while invoking the word on any and all occasions, is one of the most curious anomalies of the field, and deserves considerable self-scrutiny. To propose, as did Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth and David Wilson in their "American Cultural Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," that ". . . the concept of culture . . . become central to scholarship and teaching in American Studies," is, from the Berkhofer perspective, completely tautological.<sup>45</sup> The three authors themselves refrain from offering concrete formulations of the culture concept and hypotheses concerning its analysis and application; yet the very idea that someday this may be done has proven controversial.<sup>46</sup>

Several important new works of American Studies scholarship have shown an impressive capacity to move beyond some of the limitations of past American Studies practice. Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* and William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* are notable

<sup>43</sup>Robert F. Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," in Louis Schneider and Charles Bonjean, eds., *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1973), pp. 77-100.

<sup>44</sup>Louis Schneider, "The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences: Critical and Supplementary Observations," *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup>Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth and David Wilson, "American Cultural Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," *American Quarterly*, 25 (Oct. 1973), 369.

<sup>46</sup>See footnote 1.

for the breadth and depth of their research, their capacity to integrate evidence from several different media and forms into a unified genre pattern, their skill at explication and analysis of individual works of widely varying merit.<sup>47</sup> Both books are significant in their capacity to develop methodologies for incorporating heretofore overlooked materials into their interpretative framework. Yet it is also fair to say, I think, that each work in its own way takes as given the cultural theory of traditional American Studies, particularly the emphasis on the supreme importance of the work of art for cultural consciousness.

There are obvious reasons why it is difficult to move away from old theories and construct new ones. In American scholarship the social sciences dominate the generation of theory, and humanistic scholars have no coherent way to transform techniques and jargons of social science into their own framework. Nor, when the social sciences are in considerable internal conflict over theoretical models, do humanists have many guidelines to help them choose among competing concepts. But there is also another reason for the poverty of theory in American Studies, and that is the reluctance to utilize one of the most extensive literatures of cultural theory in modern scholarship, coming out of the Marxist intellectual tradition.

This reluctance may be a legacy of the Cold War and the links between American Studies and United States foreign policy objectives; it may be because of notions about the "deterministic" nature of Marxist cultural theory, or its subordination of culture to economic base. But to have left untouched such a potential resource exposes one of the essential causes of the problem of theory in American Studies. "How can we test our propositions with greater thoroughness?" as Warren Susman asked as a commentator at a recent AHA session.<sup>48</sup> How do we go about building a set of hypotheses? It hardly seems likely that the task can be accomplished without coming to grips with a major set of existing hypotheses, even if to criticize and reject them.<sup>49</sup>

The list of works relevant to American Studies concerns is a long one: Roland Barthes on myth and symbol systems; E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm on non-elite cultures; Antonio Gramsci on the relation between ideology and culture; T. W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin on popular cul-

<sup>47</sup>Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).

<sup>48</sup>Warren Susman, untitled commentary, AHA meeting, December 1974.

<sup>49</sup>This is in part the effort of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

ture; Raymond Williams and George Lukács, among others, on literature and culture.<sup>50</sup> Here lies an untapped potential resource for the essential task of linking the forms of consciousness and expression with the forms of social organization.

One of the first American Studies works explicitly acknowledging a connection with recent developments in the tradition of Marxist cultural theory is Larzer Ziff's *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World*.<sup>51</sup> In studying American Puritanism as a culture Ziff was able to build on one of the richest bodies of secondary literature on any aspect of American social and intellectual life. "Still," as he writes, "this is the first book that attempts to synthesize the special concerns of intellectual, social, and economic history into a single account of the American Puritans. In making this attempt, I have not granted ideas an independent existence, but have been concerned with the material conditions that brought them about and the individuals who held them. . . . the Puritans developed a particular way of living the common life and developed a pattern of reaction to the problems they confronted in their daily reality. This is what I mean by culture. . . ." <sup>1762</sup>

Ziff's work is valuable for the breadth and particularly for the even-handedness of his perspective: unlike much of the literature on such topics as the Antinomian Crisis, the persecution of Quakers, the Roger Williams controversies, the treatment of native Americans, he does not seek to justify or condemn, praise or blame. His effort to encompass the "material conditions" underlying such struggles allows him the power of insight without the fervor of partisanship. His book remains perhaps too heavily weighted toward the traditional themes of intellectual history—religion, political theory and literature. It is insufficiently concerned with social and economic behavior, with the organization of family and community, fully to succeed in depicting how "the Puritans developed a particular way of living

<sup>50</sup>See, among others, the following works: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Norton Library, 1959, 1965); Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: New World, 1973); T. W. Adorno, *Prisms* (London: Spearman, 1967); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968); Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, No. 82 (Nov.-Dec. 1973), 3-16; Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).

<sup>51</sup>Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World* (New York: Viking, 1973).

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. ix-x. Ziff cites the influence of Raymond Williams.

the common life."<sup>53</sup> But one must give Ziff great credit for recognizing the dilemma of American Studies and seeking to overcome it. Speaking of one of Puritanism's legacies, he writes, "The American intellectual and the American artist most characteristically came to center their criticism of their country on the American psyche. Their arguments with their countrymen were conducted within the culture's vocabulary as they spoke for the potential of the psychic flux that was arrested by society's forms rather than in terms of new forms for old."<sup>54</sup> This statement is an apt reflection on the methodological problems in the author's earlier study, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation*, which ascribed the problems of writers exclusively to the failures of individual psyches.<sup>55</sup> Many of the works cited here have been first books by beginning scholars; it is particularly pleasing to have in Ziff's new book the example of a mature scholar reconsidering his theoretical perspective and expanding his range.

It is also useful to have works in which the dilemma is recognized not by talking about it but by actual scholarly practice aimed at resolving it. One of the central reasons why many American Studies scholars prefer to deny they have a philosophy, or to deprecate those who talk about articulating one, has to do with pedagogical tactics: the need to survive in specific academic settings by incorporating any and all interdisciplinary urges with favor to none. Perhaps if American Studies practitioners recognized the social circumstances of their own "anti-philosophical" consciousness and expression they would be better able to grasp the relation between expression and social context in their scholarly pursuits.

"And always we find ourselves unable to bear the knowledge," Mary Douglas writes in *Natural Symbols*, "and always erecting filters to protect the idea of our own interior innocence. One such filter is the strong resistance made by many scholars to the very notion of social determinants of belief. They would rather think of beliefs floating free in an autonomous vacuum, developing according to their own inner logic, bumping into other ideas by the chance of historical contact and being modified by new insights. This is an inverted materialism. In the name of the primacy of mind over matter, its adherents evade their own responsibility for choosing the circumstances of their intellectual freedom. To insure autonomy of mind we should first recognize the restrictions imposed by material existence."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Puritan social and economic behavior has been the subject of such important recent works as Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1676* (New York: Norton, 1970), and Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970).

<sup>54</sup>Ziff, *Puritanism in America*, p. 311.

<sup>55</sup>Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking, 1966).

<sup>56</sup>Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 173.