American Studies and the Realities of America

What is the capacity of American Studies to respond to the realities of America? Among the considerable literature on the nature and methods of American Studies hardly a word has been written on the subject. Scholars are notably reticent to examine the social origins of their research and curricula, and we in American Studies have not been exceptions. Yet this reluctance has given us some unease, and no more so than at the present moment. American Studies justifies itself by claiming to offer intellectual opportunities and educational services that traditional disciplines do not provide; ultimately we assert that our multi- or supra-disciplinary approach can help the culture understand itself in uniquely perceptive ways. If our special claims should be false and our opportunities and services irrelevant, only bureaucratic inertia will keep the field alive. How American Studies responds to the realities of America is no mere academic question.

It is as academics, however, and specifically as American Studies scholars and teachers, that our relation to American culture should primarily be measured. No necessary connection exists between one’s scholarship and his active life in a university or as a citizen. But if we are to discover any logical, rather than accidental, role that American Studies may undertake within its academic and public communities, we should begin by assessing the intellectual styles and scholarly methods of our field.

American Studies, as an intellectual discipline, is in crisis. It shouldn’t surprise anyone; as an intellectual discipline American Studies has always been in crisis. In spite of all the searches for an elusive essence that occupy our journals and textbooks, American Studies has defined itself by what it does rather than by what it claims to represent, by its existence in the particular moment, instead of through an evolutionary growth leading to a hypothetical maturity. But the present crisis is more serious than all previous crises. This is true not only because American society is
facing more complex and demanding problems than it has ever before in
the lifetime of the American Studies movement. It is also true because the
scholarly perspectives and techniques from which American Studies
has principally drawn its energy over the past generation are themselves
being criticized, re-examined and, in all likelihood, transformed.

For all practical purposes American Studies grew up within the orbits
of two traditional academic fields, English and history. Significant
contributions have been made at various times and places by such fields
as art history, political science and sociology, but the dominant method-
ological influences on American Studies have been literary and historical.
Influence of course works in both directions—since 1945 American
Studies scholarship has shaped the way literature and history are studied
in the older disciplines as much as they have determined the development
of American Studies. Many books and articles written by scholars with
American Studies doctorates or teaching in American Studies programs
rank among the significant works of American literary and historical
scholarship in the past generation. Yet the importance of American
Studies for history and English only reinforces how deeply American
Studies is implicated in the critical re-examinations now taking place
in those fields.

These re-evaluations, moreover, are particularly centered in the special-
ties most intimately connected with the rise of the American Studies
movement—literary history and intellectual history. They might even be
joined together as a single scholarly method, for their subject matter
considerably overlaps, and American Studies scholars have not hesitated
to cross artificial departmental boundaries in their effort to create a
unified supra-disciplinary approach. This fusion of literary and intellectual
history they have built over the past generation may be called "high
cultural history"—the study of the arts and artists, of intellectuals and
of ideas. High cultural history flourished from the late 1930s to the late
1960s, when it began to slip into its present crisis, and it is possible to con-
sider the rise and decline of this scholarly movement as an aspect of
the culture itself.

The roots of high cultural history are deeply entwined with the origins
of the American Studies movement; it is likely that American Studies
would never have grown and prospered after 1945 had it been so closely
associated with a different scholarly method, for example, the study of
mass culture or folk culture. High cultural history, like most new develop-
ments in the world of scholarship, arose in the late 1930s out of choices
and circumstances of the moment. Certain approaches seemed played out,
or overextended or unproductive; others looked far more promising. On
the negative side, the social history movement of the interwar years had
lost its momentum, swamped by mountains of data for which it had developed no method of organizing; Marxist literary criticism had opened few avenues to the study of American writers; and the celebration of American popular culture which had flowered in the depression years seemed to be taking an anti-intellectual turn in the hands of critics like Bernard De Voto and Van Wyck Brooks.

On the positive side, the new criticism and the history of ideas had emerged by the late 1930s as new and exciting tools for the understanding of literature and intellectual life: Arthur O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being* had been published in 1936, Cleanth Brooks’ and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* in 1938. Uniting new criticism with the history of ideas seemed a brilliantly innovative way to approach American literature and intellectual history, which were themselves so deeply interrelated. The American Studies movement was significantly shaped by formative works of high cultural history like Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind* (1939) and F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), rather than by one or another productive mode of approaching American culture like Constance Rourke’s popular culture studies or Lewis Mumford’s studies in technology and cities.

High cultural history—and that considerable part of the American Studies movement with which it overlapped—asserted the primacy of mind as the central factor in culture, and the autonomy of the individual work of art. It did not necessarily turn its back on society. Rather high cultural history argued that American society could most perceptively be studied through works of intellect and imagination. America’s culture was peculiarly shaped by systems of myths and symbols that were most precisely expressed and deeply explored in the writings of novelists, poets and intellectuals. Thus the nature of American society could be discovered by studying its reflections in the imaginations and intellects of men and women who stood both within and outside their culture, who preached to it and criticized it and created its enduring symbols and models—Emerson and Thoreau, Cooper and Whitman, Henry Adams and Henry James, Crane and Dreiser, and many more. High cultural history showed how mind and art interacted with society, but from the perspective of mind and art. The era of high cultural history was a period when biography and history through collective biography were popular; when studies on myth, symbol and rhetoric flourished; when literary criticism and literary history hardly left untouched a writer who put pen to paper in America.

High cultural history’s response to the realities of America in the generation between the late 1930s and late 1960s was inherently an ambiguous one. Certainly the proliferation of high cultural history went hand-
in-hand with the needs of the new American empire to assert its cultural
pedigree to older cultures which had become dependent on America,
and a considerable amount of American Studies energy went into the
international effort to make American literature and American ideas
respectable and even significant to scholars in Europe and Asia. Certainly
the relatively little attention American Studies gave to social history
and such subjects as poverty and protest in the postwar years reflected a
lack of interest in these issues in the society at large. On the other
hand, the American Studies movement also attracted many liberal and
radical scholars—Miller and Matthiessen were good examples of one and
the other—who found in high cultural history and literary criticism
opportunities to explore the shortcomings of American culture, the con-
flict of ideals and actions, of rhetoric and reality.

The crisis in high cultural history at the present time derives from sim-
ilar ambiguities, from developments within the world of scholarship
itself, from changes in social realities and our perception of them. As a
scholarly method, high cultural history has been criticized from several
perspectives. The generation of new critics is now passing from the
scene, and in retrospect their cultural program is seen more as impres-
sionism than as theory. Their achievements and their failures have
helped us to see that the analysis of a literary work need not at the same
time give an interpretation of the nature of a society, and that to account
fully for the lives and careers of writers one may first need to under-
stand the social structure in which they lived and worked. Similar limits
and limitations to the studies of ideas and intellectuals were described a
decade ago by John Higham in his “American Intellectual History: A
Critical Appraisal.” The study of American culture, whether of high
culture or of the whole culture, seems to have reached a point in the late
1960s where the most fruitful direction for further advances lies in
an intensified study of society and social structure.

At the same time, with the emergence of civil rights and the war in
Vietnam as leading public issues of the 1960s, social and political problems
began to place greater and greater demands on the time of American
Studies scholars. Many students and teachers are spending more of
their energy in struggle meetings, teach-ins and marches, and less
in the library and the study. It has even been suggested that the era of re-
search scholarship in the humanities is now coming to an end, and human-
istic teacher-scholars should dedicate their efforts to changing their
universities and American society. Such a call exerts a powerful appeal
to many of us in American Studies. The crisis in a particular scholarly
method, high cultural history, is closely related to the broader need of
justifying American Studies scholarship itself.
American Studies scholars may answer that it is better—for any purpose—to have knowledge than to be ignorant. But certainly not all knowledge is of the same worth. The history of American culture provides considerable evidence of men and women stifled not by ignorance but by constricting intellectual traditions and systems of thought, from which they had to break free before they could function as creative minds. There is no shame, no diminution of intellectual rigor or professional standards, in asking of American Studies scholarship that it be intellectually liberating, freeing our minds and those of our students to seek new worlds of knowledge and of being.

The most promising and most challenging scholarly task for the American Studies community at the present moment is to forge a link between culture and society—to create a whole cultural history of the United States. In the past generation scholars of high culture, historians of consensuses, and students of national character have claimed to provide a comprehensive view of American culture, yet each claim has proven to be an exclusive or partial or limited one. What is needed is not a belief that one culture exists in America and one approach will give a complete view of it, but rather a recognition that a variety of cultures exist in America, each one creating its separate institutions and forms, its alternative vision of reality. The method which can give a clear picture of cultural pluralism and cultural conflict is the method which will come closest to fulfilling the traditional American Studies aim of building a unifying frame for a diversified cultural pattern.

For an effective method of studying the whole culture the principal requirement now is to develop a deeper and broader conception of social structure than American Studies has heretofore had. A more complete view of social structure would enable American Studies scholars to identify cultural groups and expressions that a limited perspective on American society might overlook; and it would provide a more comprehensive sense of the social, political and economic sources of cultural conflict and change. Over the past generation American Studies has been estranged from studies of society and social structure partly by our humanistic antipathy toward sociological jargon and quantitative methodology. In seeking now to explore the structure of American society, American Studies need not embrace the present-day dilemmas of academic sociology. Rather American Studies should strive to attain as inter- and supradisciplinary a conception of society as it has tried to create for high culture, drawing upon and integrating sociology, anthropology, economics and politics, as well as history and the arts, in the manner of the classic social thinkers C. Wright Mills cites in *The Sociological Imagination*—among them Veblen and Schumpeter, Weber and Marx.
Recent trends within and on the edge of the American Studies movement already point to an increasing interest in a broader approach to the whole American culture. The field of popular culture is rapidly developing, and a scholarly society has been organized, but the revival of popular cultural studies has yet to demonstrate that it can move beyond the stage of appreciation and rediscovery to an effective structural treatment of popular culture within the full context of American society. Similar hopes and reservations may be expressed about studies in the history of technology. Comparative history seems an especially useful approach for American Studies, because it may help to clarify connections between culture and social structure. As David Riesman pointed out some years ago, behavior studied in national isolation may appear the unique product of American national character; but in a comparative perspective, the same behavior may be observed in several countries as a product of broader yet far more specific social and economic trends.

Meanwhile, changing social concerns bring forth new scholarly interests—Black Studies, the American Indian, the status of women, communal movements, the lives of workers and the poor. We are not at a loss for new topics and new questions. For American Studies to take up the task of creating a whole cultural history would be the most hopeful means of keeping pace with, and perhaps moving to the forefront of, contemporary study of the realities of America.

As students and teachers in American Studies departments and programs, our most pressing need may be to see ourselves through the eyes of others. American Studies has traditionally defined itself in the university setting as a movement for radical change and experiment. Much of the American Studies self-image, however, is founded in the original break from English and history departments in order to teach and study American literature and culture. Though a few departments still hold out, the first American Studies revolution has won nearly a complete victory. Now American culture and literature hold a prominent place in the courses most English and history departments offer. If we define ourselves existentially by what we do rather than by what we say, what is it that we do that the traditional departments now cannot do quite as well?

While the American Studies revolution has considerably aged, another revolution has been taking place in the colleges and universities to which American Studies has been only tenuously connected—the development of programs studying contemporary American social problems, programs in minority cultures and history, in urban studies, in environment and ecology. To students and staff attracted to these new programs American Studies appears not as irrelevant but rather as different: you in American
Studies study the arts and ideas, we over here will study society. In some universities American Studies has served as the model for new intra- or supra-disciplinary programs in Black Studies or urban studies, with never a thought given to the idea that American Studies might well be the proper home for such subjects. In part American Studies has been bypassed because funding sources require that something "new and innovative" be built with their money; but also in part American Studies has been overlooked because of the widely-held belief that it is concerned with high culture, the arts and ideas, rather than with the whole culture and the structure of society.

The effort to link culture and society in American Studies courses and scholarship would help to revive—or perhaps create for the first time—the recognition that American Studies is devoted to the whole culture rather than to a part of it. In universities and colleges where black or urban or environmental studies programs have not yet been started, American Studies might take the lead by integrating these subjects into its own curriculum. Elsewhere, by studying the whole American culture, American Studies may attract students, staff and support from the new fields as those fields reveal methodological limitations or an inability to encompass the full spectrum of culture.

An additional revolution is now taking place in the colleges and universities to which American Studies must relate: the revolution in students' expectations. The present-day generation of students especially seeks to share the rights and responsibilities for making decisions concerning curriculum, requirements, academic policy and other matters affecting their lives as students. An articulate expression of these interests may well be greater in American Studies than in other fields, for many students are drawn to American Studies by their desire for academic freedom and self-determination, their dislike of rigid requirements and the narrow professionalism they perceive in other fields. A perennial conflict exists between the desire to attain respectability in the eyes of department chairmen and university administrators, and the need to grow and change as new generations of American Studies students define new goals and new interests. But how can we justify our place in the curriculum if we have ceased to experiment and innovate? American Studies programs should take the lead in developing the spirit and the institutional forms that will foster a community of students and faculty working together in their common intellectual enterprise.

It has been said that for most of us the American Studies Association is a second organization; thus the ability of our purses to sustain ASA and American Quarterly—if not our loyalty—is sharply limited. This circum-
stance might suggest to some that ASA and AQ cannot do more than they are now doing; it might suggest to others that they do not need to support an organization which provides us with no more than another opportunity to hear and read academic papers and a quarterly which offers merely one more outlet to publish dissertation chapters. But if our principal public voices, ASA and AQ, cannot usefully respond to the realities of America, such a failure might well suggest that American Studies can be no more successful through its scholarship or teaching. An effort to revitalize ASA and AQ is therefore a central task for the American Studies movement if it intends to relate itself in any effective way to the realities of American culture.

The formation of a Radical Caucus at the 1969 ASA national meeting was a promising first step toward the reinvigoration of ASA and AQ. The survival of the Radical Caucus is as existential a question as any other concerning the American Studies movement. It may not survive; it may fragment into smaller groups, one primarily linked with the New University Conference, another devoted to reforming ASA, perhaps a third seeking to develop its own community and American Studies journal. The Radical Caucus has at least begun the debate on the roles ASA and AQ can play in American society, and that debate is likely to continue under many auspices.

What follows are several suggestions for actions that ASA and AQ could undertake that might demonstrate their capacity to respond to the realities of American culture. These are practical in that their cost would be minimal and they could be put into effect at once. Moreover, they would not put ASA in the position of expounding political views:

1. ASA should scrap the present format of the national meeting, which makes few contributions not already made by AHA, OAH, MLA and the regional MLA meetings, and devote national ASA meetings to forums on national political and social issues, on educational issues and on scholarly issues. These should be organized as panels and as open discussions. In this manner ASA members can engage in debate and dialogue and exchange information and insights on the broad range of concerns which represent reality for American Studies scholars.

2. ASA should organize, and invite interested persons to take part in, special commissions to investigate and formulate proposals on the status of women in American Studies, the place of minority groups students and studies in the field, faculty-student relations in American Studies, the role of American Studies in American society, and other concerns. These commissions should be composed equally of faculty and students.

3. ASA should alter the composition of the Executive Council so that it included an equal number of faculty and students.
4. ASA should seek to forge a connection between American Studies on the college and university level and American Studies in the high schools.

5. ASA should publish a monthly newsletter for members during the academic year. This newsletter could be mimeographed and mailed at little cost. It could serve as the forum for association news (many of the events *AQ* announces have taken place before *AQ* arrives), could print the ASA membership roster, could provide space for letters and debates on ASA policies, and thereby become the source of information and communication that ASA needs and so badly lacks. ASA should also make its membership list available without cost to members organized into affinity groups or to individual members who wish to publish newsletters or other communications.

6. *American Quarterly* should adopt a new policy, discouraging the submission of dissertation chapters and descriptive articles, and actively seeking broader, more general and more speculative articles. It might give over single issues to a particular subject or theme. It should expand the review section to include more review essays which provide information and assessments on methodological problems and opportunities in the field.

We live in an era when more and more of our students are learning to call their country Amerika. How is American Studies going to respond to that reality and to all the others, while at the same time we strengthen our capacity, as William James described it in *The Will to Believe*, “delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom”? These are interesting times, and we have stimulating tasks ahead of us.

Robert Sklar, University of Michigan

Sweep foot ho! Sweep for your foot!