

“THE SPECIAL AMERICAN CONDITIONS”: MARXISM AND AMERICAN STUDIES

. . . and then there are the special American conditions . . .

Friedrich Engels, 1851

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.

Robert Sklar, “The Problem of an American
Studies ‘Philosophy,’” 1975

In a limited sense, this is a “Marxist” book; in many senses, it is unrecognizably Marxist. For American intellectuals, pro and contra Marx, this is probably as it should be. While it may come close to impossible to think about progressive change without engaging Marxist categories, one of the lessons to be drawn from Kenneth Burke’s career is that an American (“self-reliant”) Marxism is fundamentally an absurd proposition. The “active” critical soul in America, from Emerson to Burke, joins parties of one, because it is there, in America, that critical power flourishes.

Frank Lentricchia, 1983

In his survey of developments in New Left Marxism in the 1970s, Perry Anderson argued that "the sheer density of ongoing economic, political, sociological and cultural research on the Marxist Left in Britain or North America, with its undergrowth of journals and discussions, eclipses any equivalent in the older lands of the Western Marxist tradition proper. . . . Today the *predominant* centres of intellectual production seem to lie in the English-speaking world." This New Left intellectual renaissance had a powerful impact on the universities in the United States, as graduate students and young faculty members created "radical caucuses" and alternative journals in the disciplines and professional associations that structured the "*multiversity*," the mass universities created during the age of three worlds. In the face of this, the place of Marxism in the study of American culture, in American studies, was somewhat anomalous. For here, there had been little engagement with Marxism by American studies scholars, and few Marxists interpreting American culture: American cultural history had not seen the revisionist historiography that marked American diplomatic, labor, and social history in the work, for example, of William Appleman Williams, David Montgomery, and Eugene Genovese. American studies, which had taken shape in the early years of the Cold War, had become – despite the intentions of some of its intellectual founders – a part of what might be called "the American ideology" of the age of three worlds: the deep sense of the exceptionalism of this "people of plenty," the unquestioned virtue of democracy and the "American way of life," and the sense that the world was entering an American century.¹

Thus, the intellectual history of American studies – and its curious relation to the New Left renaissance in Marxist thought – offers a telling glimpse into the self-consciousness and contradictions of the American ideology. In this chapter, I will offer an interpretative history of American studies, outlining its founding break with the Marxism of the 1930s, and suggesting that American studies has served as a substitute for Marxism in a variety of ways, leading to the curious sense, held by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, that "American Marxism" is "an absurd proposition," at once an oxymoron and a pleonasm.

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 were not substantial Marxist cultural studies dealing with the United States. The first had to do with the way Marxist cultural thought reentered American intellectual activity between 1960 and 1985. It came through the rediscovery, translation, and interpretation of continental "*Western Marxists*:" Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Korsch, Sartre, Althusser, Lefebvre. Fredric Jameson's 1971 book *Marxism and Form* may stand as the epitome of this work, and it is significant that his professional affiliation was French language and literature. The most interesting work of American Marxist cultural critics remained centered on European theory, texts, and culture, and was found in journals like *Telos*, *New German Critique*, and *Semiotexte*. Unlike the powerful impact of the British Marxist historians (E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Christopher Hill, among others) on American history writing, European Marxist cultural theory left little imprint on American cultural studies.²

The second reason lay in the peculiar formation of American studies itself, which had 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, the finest analyst of the culture of the thirties, saw this 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 explicator 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 anti-Communist 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 this American studies, American Marxism was surely an oxymoron: Americanism substituted for Marxism as an antidote.³

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. The "myth/symbol" school, Alan Trachtenberg argued, 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 can hardly be 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 early works in American studies, and this tradition continued 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."⁴

Ironically, this critical American studies also served as a "substitute Marxism." For its direct ancestry is less Emerson than the peculiar union of the "usable past" cultural criticism – that of Brooks, Mumford, and Waldo Frank – and the cultural politics of Popular Front Communism, which recovered and celebrated American folk culture in the late 1930s and 1940s. The figure of F.O. Matthiessen was indeed central to this union and to its later influence in American studies.

This ancestry 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.⁵ 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 sign 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.⁶

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 the US 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."⁷

As a result, this critical tradition of American studies often combined radical dissent with an ambivalence toward Marxist theory, a disposition it shared with the emerging New Left.⁸ Leo Marx accurately noted in 1983:

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 economic version of Marxism that Matthiessen found repugnant. . . . The overall tendency of Marxist thought during the last twenty years has been to allow much greater historical efficacy to ideas and non-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.

However, this ambivalence toward Marxism led to a common, if curious, rhetoric in American cultural studies, which finds an exaggerated, but not unusual, example in Jackson Lears' oft-cited 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 Lears cites positively are central to the Marxist tradition. Thus, the continuing specter of a Second International or Stalinist Marxism often prevented a serious engage-

ment with contemporary Marxism, and led to the random borrowing of terms from a Gramsci, a Williams, a Benjamin – borrowings that too often ignored the context and role of the concepts in a larger conceptual system and tradition.⁹

So this critical American studies became 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 then 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 was "What is American?" Consider the difference if the discipline had been constituted as cultural studies, as was the case with the analogous formation that grew out of the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall in Britain during the same period. 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's *Culture and Society* (1958) on the other.¹⁰ 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 proved richer and more prolific than any of the founding generation of American studies, and the underfunded and understaffed Birmingham University Centre for Contempor-

ary Cultural Studies produced a body of work with greater political and intellectual influence than that of any American studies program.¹¹ 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 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.¹² 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 US 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 World War I and the complex history of the Soviet Union have purged from contemporary Marxism any simple (or even complex) inevitabilism. 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.¹³

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, 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 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.¹⁴

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?"¹⁵ In the next section of this chapter, 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 New Left Marxists began that revision.¹⁶

The New Left's Revisionist History of American Culture

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 classic instance for a Marxist criticism, Melville would seem to lie beyond its boundaries. However, several New Left critics 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's treatment of the historical novel in his *Versions of the Past* (1974), a discussion of the historical fiction written by "classic" American writers, and Myra Jehlen's use of Lukács's 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 derived from his analysis of the cultural effects of the commodity form, his theory of reification: Michael T. Gilmore's *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985) which analyzes the response of the romantics to the commodification of literature, and Carolyn Porter's *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."¹⁷

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 appeared in June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985) and Rachel Bowlby's *Just Looking* (1985). The work of leftist writers of the 1930s was reexamined by Alan Wald and Robert Rosen, and H. Bruce Franklin's recovery and interpretation of working-class and minority writing founds a thorough revision of American literary history in *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978).¹⁸

Though Marxist-feminist scholarship 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, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (1978), and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *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 was informed by Marxist-feminist theories of gender and sexuality as well as by Marxist debates over popular literary forms.¹⁹ And a similar concern for

popular fiction produced significant Marxist work on science fiction.²⁰ In these works, Marxist literary criticism moved beyond offering "Marxist readings" of particular texts, and began to reshape the contours of American literary history.

Behind the romance interpretation of American literary history lay perhaps the most durable explanatory framework for American history and culture: the frontier thesis. American studies 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 Vietnam?"), 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 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 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."²¹

What Slotkin, Rogin, and Takaki did was to recast the "special American conditions" of culture in an historical materialist way, suggesting that the uniqueness of the United States lay in the contradictions of a specifically "settler colonial" capitalism. 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. 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 precapitalist 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.²²

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 entangling of race and class has always been seen by Marxists, in the US and abroad, as fundamental to understanding American history and society.²³ In African-American cultural studies from a Marxist perspective, there has been particular attention to what Cornel West 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 Cornel 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 found interpreters in a number of Marxist traditions, including Popular Front Communism (Sidney Finkelstein), the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno), American Trotskyism (Frank Kofsky), and New Left Marxist surrealism (Paul Garon).²⁴

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 tropics 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* (1987), a study of the ways nineteenth-century black women writers reconstructed dominant sexual and racial ideologies.²⁵ 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 "interdiscipline." 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 was 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 debate among Marxists as to how to characterize the mode of production of the North American colonies.²⁶

Nevertheless, the issue of Puritanism confronted New Left Marxist

cultural critics for, in the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, it grounded an influential and powerful version of American exceptionalism. In the rhetoric of the Puritans, particularly in the form of the jeremiad, Bercovitch found the source 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 substitutive 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.²⁷ 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 "embourgeoisment" 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,"²⁸ 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 1939, and essays by Theodor Adorno and Leo Lowenthal were included in the pioneering 1957 anthology, *Mass Culture*.²⁹ The Frankfurt School's 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, it became common for Marxist and non-Marxist discussions of mass culture to open with ritual exorcisms of the Frankfurt School. However, within Frankfurt critical theory, an alternative view of the "age of mechanical reproduction" could 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 reinvigorated discussions of mass, consumer, or popular culture.³⁰ Perhaps the most important and influential theoretical reformulation was 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 suggested that "works of mass culture cannot be

ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly 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."³¹

Among the New Left works that analyzed the institutions and products of the culture industry, Stuart Ewen's pioneering study of advertising, *Captains of Consciousness* (1976), was perhaps the most directly inspired by the Frankfurt School, and was criticized for its depiction of the overwhelming power of advertising to shape desire and paralyze dissent; a more dialectical understanding of mass culture emerged in the subsequent book by Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen, *Channels of Desire* (1982). The work of Herbert Schiller focused on the economic organization of the culture industry, with particular attention to its international power. The related work of the Chilean Ariel Dorfman 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 drew 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).³²

Film studies, which 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*. American Marxist film studies developed in such journals as *Jump Cut* and *Cineaste*, and in the work of Bill Nichols, E. Ann Kaplan, Peter Biskind, and Robert Ray.³³

A dissatisfaction with an exclusive focus on the institutions and products of mass culture, and with assumptions of a passive and undifferentiated audience, provoked a number of works that focused 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," explored the relations between mass

culture, the new middle classes, and an emerging culture of abundance, consumption, and personality.³⁴

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 1960s and 1970s reconstructed the picture of American workers and their lives, it did not fundamentally revise American cultural history.³⁵ "The story of American culture," according to socialist cultural historian Warren Susman, "remains largely the story of . . . the enormous American middle class." However, by the 1980s, work building on the "new" labor history began 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* (1987) 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 path breaking essays on working women's consciousness were 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. George Lipsitz offered 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 was 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.³⁶

Finally, there were a few major contributions to Marxist cultural theory by North American Marxists. Clearly the most influential figure was Fredric Jameson. *Marxism and Form* in many ways inaugurated the revival of

Marxist cultural theory, and *The Political Unconscious* (1981), which included both a model for Marxist interpretation and a rewriting of the history of the novel, was probably the most debated Marxist cultural text of the period.³⁷ Stanley Aronowitz's *The Crisis of Historical Materialism* engaged tendencies in European Marxism from the standpoint of American developments in politics and theory, and offered an important rethinking of Marxism through cultural categories. Bertell Ollman's *Alienation* (1976) was a major contribution to the elaboration of Marx's theory. Richard Ohmann's *English in America* (1976) stands as a major critique of a central discipline of cultural studies, and the engagement of Marxism with other critical theories was 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 charted the relationship between Marxism and several strands of American thought: Afro-American critical thought, pragmatism, and Christianity. 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 draw on and offer much to contemporary Marxists.³⁸

Why Marxism?

A reader may follow me thus far, and still step back and echo Edward Said who, in discussing his relation to Marxism, noted that he had "been more influenced by Marxists than by Marxism or by any other ism." 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 be 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.³⁹

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 they 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 in part to avoid the tyranny of fashion in contemporary theory – who will be the theorist to know and cite next year? – 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 American antinomianism, just as there is no fully “authored” discourse of one, there are no “parties of one.” We are condemned to affiliation. Said argues:

It is the case, with cultural or aesthetic activity that the possibilities and circumstances of its production get their authority by virtue of what I have called affiliation, that implicit network of peculiarly cultural associations between forms, statements, and other aesthetic elaborations on the one hand, and, on the other, institutions, agencies, classes, and amorphous social forces.

By affiliation, then, I mean more than simply political party affiliation, though that was the focus of the purge of the academy in the 1950s. The New Left revision of American cultural history depended not only on the social movements of 1968 but on the networks established among socialist scholars: the Socialist Scholars Conferences of 1965–70, revived annually after 1983; and the journals, both those, like *Science and Society*, *Dissent*, and *Monthly Review*, which survived from the old left, and those, like *Socialist Revolution* (later *Socialist Review*) and *Radical America*, that were products of the New Left. The journals of the new Marxist cultural studies flourished in the 1970s and 1980s: *Social Text*, *Cultural Correspondence*, *Tabloid: A Review of*

Mass Culture and Everyday Life, *Praxis*, *Radical History Review*, *Radical Teacher*, *Minnesota Review*, *Cultural Critique*, and the short-lived *Marxist Perspectives*.⁴⁰

Third, Marxism does offer one of the few coherent alternatives to the search for an “interdisciplinary method” that has long haunted American studies. The dream of semiotics as a master science of signs and the structuralist promise of uniting the disciplines around a common linguistic model both faded in the face of post-structuralist critiques and the skepticism of historians. “Modernization theory” 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’s “cultural materialism,” the appeal to the last instance of demography, and accounts of the “essence” of a nation, race, gender, or period.⁴¹

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.⁴² We can characterize the four main modes of Marxist cultural studies at present by their central concepts: commodity/reification; ideology; class/hegemony; and cultural materialism.

The first is based on Marx’s account of the fetishism of commodities and Lukács’s 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."⁴³

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.⁴⁴

The fourth direction of Marxist cultural studies focuses on the material production and consumption of culture. It is exemplified by Raymond Williams's project of "cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism." Williams's 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.⁴⁵

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. This 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."⁴⁶ But to dismiss it 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-World War II 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 were particularly 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 works 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."