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CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES
TO THE STUDY OF AMERICA
Papers from the 1977 American Studies Symposium
at the University of Iowa

*Some Elementary Axioms for
an American Culture Studies*

GENE WISE

Burke reduces the number of things to look for but increases the number of ways to look for them—William Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*.

SINCE THE MID-1960s and the waning of the symbol-myth-image school, American culture studies has been adrift intellectually. It has first of all lacked a grounding center—that is, a more or less agreed-upon vision of American culture and of the social structure undergirding it. Consensus on such a vision—at least of the culture if not always of the social structure—gave energy and direction to Americanist symbol-myth-image studies during their heyday in the decade and a half after 1950. Lacking such a consensus since then, American culture studies have also been uprooted from the holistic rhetoric of the interdisciplinary that gave impetus to teaching and scholarship in the movement during past years. We still hear exhortations to “see the culture whole,” or to “integrate all of American experience.” But such injunctions seem out of place now, when the culture itself appears not as all of a piece, but as divided—rent with strains

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and gaps which make it look like not a single thing but as several. American Studies has not faced up to the intellectual consequences of this change.¹ A brief review of the past should indicate why.

From its founding years in the early 1930s through the mid-1960s, the historic movement for an integrating "American Studies" was justified by a consensus of sorts on what American culture is and how to study it. Called the "intellectual history consensus," it was guided by several working assumptions.

First, most within the consensus felt that American culture is a more or less integrated whole. Though it may consist of many functioning parts, the culture is viewed as a single thing, with the several parts all feeding into a common center.

Second, the culture is most clearly expressed in the great ideas of American thought—Puritanism, Rationalism, Transcendentalism, Liberalism, Pragmatism, the Idea of Progress. Third, in these ideas may be located "The American Mind"—a complex admixture of beliefs expressed by the Edwardses, the Franklins, the Emersons, the Melvilles, the Twains, and the Deweys. These great thinkers rendered in pure form the unarticulated thoughts of the many in America.

Fourth, the scholarly study of American culture should try and bring together what the several academic disciplines have kept apart. Since American culture is, in fact, an integrated whole, the holistic search for that culture—embodied in its great ideas—becomes an intellectual imperative. Separated study of an integrated whole makes little sense; if the culture is in fact a single thing, reason the holists, it is sensible to bring the separate disciplines together into a single, integrated vision.

It is this integrating imperative that originally made American Studies go, as it were. It functioned almost as a Kuhnian "paradigm"²—giving purpose and direction to the interdisciplinary study of the culture during the movement's first thirty-odd years.³ Out of that imperative early courses and programs in American Studies were developed and justified.⁴ From this imperative also came the most notable scholarship of those formative years—the *New England Mind* volumes of Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, R. W. B. Lewis' *American Adam*, Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*.⁵

DIS-INTEGRATION OF THE HOLISTIC FAITH

Then came the 1960s and the fragmentation of that consensus. Much of this is a familiar story and needn't be detailed here.⁶ Suffice it to say that after the experience of the 1960s, few—either in academe or in America at large—would still envision the culture as a seamless

whole, all its parts connecting to a common center. Berkeley, Watts, Viet Nam, Haight-Ashbury, the assassinations, black power, flower power, Kent State, Jackson State, Attica, the women's liberation movement—these and more shattered, perhaps forever, the myth of homogeneity in American culture.

They also put a massive strain on the "American Mind" heritage of academic culture studies. That that heritage had got to a fundamental part of the American past was undeniable. That it got to the whole of it became increasingly a matter for doubt. After 1965, few could seriously maintain that, say, the "virgin land" myth or the symbol of the "American as Adam" explained *The American Mind* of the nineteenth century. And many came to doubt whether "mind" studies got at the important realities anyway. Where intellectual history had been the promising new field of the 1940s and 1950s, in the 1960s and 1970s it was supplanted by scholarship in social history—a field which minimizes the impact of mind in historical experience and looks instead at people's measurable behavior and at the impersonal functioning of social institutions.⁷

As a result, American culture studies has lost its grounding center over the last decade. Before, activity in the field had tended to converge on the study of symbols and myths. But in the 1970s the movement seems almost as dis-integrated as the culture itself. A recent publication of the National American Studies Faculty itemizes no less than seventy-four separate categories of specialization for scholars in the field—from study of the aged to archaeology to bio-ethics to child-rearing to linguistics to prison reform. And these in addition to the more familiar subcultural studies that have grown up around American Studies of late—black studies, women's studies, popular culture studies, ethnic studies, ecology studies, youth studies, and so on. The field has virtually no principle of exclusion anymore; anything labeled "American" may be seen as "American Studies."

Those committed to the old holistic faith may see the field now as a kind of academic waste land—Eliot's "heap of broken images" with nothing to hold it together or give it distinctive meaning. They ask where are the *Virgin Lands*, the *American Adams*, the *Machine in the Gardens* today?

Others, relishing the new pluralism, point to the continued growth of the movement even during these academic depression years, to activities of the National American Studies Faculty, to the biannual national conventions of the American Studies Association (none was held, by the way, during the "Golden Years" of symbol-myth-image dominance), and to the rich variety of subcultural studies which indicate range and vitality in the movement.⁸

Good cases can be made for either the "decline and decay" thesis of recent American Studies, or the "rise and growth" thesis.⁹ But neither side would deny that the altered situation in America poses an in-

tellectual challenge, if not a substantial threat, to the traditional imperative of interdisciplinary culture studies. And both sides have neglected an even deeper challenge to American culture studies, and more generally to American scholarship, today—the crisis of information-overload, and its structural consequence, increasing specialization of scholarly labor.

THE BURDEN OF INFORMATION-OVERLOAD AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CULTURE STUDIES

Since Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* in 1970, we have been made conscious of "information-overload"—a state where people are engulfed by more than their minds can manage. Following Toffler, we in academe take information-overload to be a disease of the larger society—where television, radio, advertising billboards, junk mail, and other media of mass industrial culture bombard us with more messages than we can meaningfully sort out. The result, we know, is either succumbing to the disease, with subsequent intellectual paralysis, or finding various devices for sensory shielding, where we learn to shut out more than we take in.¹⁰

But scholars in academe have not thought of information-overload as a problem of their own. Nor have they—in one of the major information-producing industries in contemporary society—felt that they too might be responsible for the mounting volume of data in American culture. Those inclined to count in such matters claim that scholarly knowledge is doubling in mass about every twenty years.¹¹ If this is true, then our stockpile of information about historic American culture is now more than four times as large as it was in the early 1930s, when American Studies was born.

This fact alone should give us pause about continuing to talk of "seeing the culture whole," or "integrating all the disciplines." And it casts doubt on the conventional idea that programs in the field should aim for "a broad training in Americana." What was conceivable for, say, a Vernon Louis Parrington earlier in the century is not possible today; the volume of information is simply too massive for anyone to hope for even a representative sample of the culture, let alone for covering the whole.

When we add to the quantitative expanse of information the fact that we have also been discovering new subjects—e.g., blacks, women, popular culture, material culture, the poor, children, the aged—and are devising new means of handling our subjects—e.g., quantitative methods, oral history, psychohistory—then we place an intolerable burden on the old holistic faith of American culture studies.

Obviously, individual minds cannot grow at the same exponential

rate as the expansion of scholarly information. Hence academics have been forced, willy-nilly, to cope with this onrush of information. Over the years, such coping devices have come mostly by indirection, since—for reasons detailed below—scholars have been reluctant to admit information-overload as a problem of their own. As a result, they have failed to confront the dilemma self-consciously.

Academe, rather, has simply done what most social institutions do in a state of rapid expansion. Sometimes reflectively, more often without forethought, such institutions tend to subdivide and specialize. If wholes or even large parts cannot be managed, then they are arbitrarily cut into smaller and smaller units. In the larger economic world, we speak of this process as “division of labor”; productive work tasks are broken down and portioned out to industrial assembly lines. Over the last several years, an analogous transformation has taken place in institutions of scholarship.

A colleague who attended a major eastern graduate institution in the 1950s recalls that his history department had two American historians—one to cover the entire pre-Civil War period, one the post-Civil War. With that kind of broad training, he was subsequently to teach courses in colonial American history, the history of the West, social history, historiography, native American history, intellectual history, and twentieth-century America, in addition to courses in core American Studies.

His experience is paralleled by many who took their graduate training prior to the last decade and a half—the years of most rapid expansion and intense specialization in academe. Those whose doctorates preceded the 1960s have, in their subsequent careers, moved rather smoothly across disciplinary boundaries, from American Studies programs to departments of history to departments of literature. Take, for example, a Henry Nash Smith, an R. W. B. Lewis, a Roy Harvey Pearce, all of whom first identified with American Studies then moved on to establish reputations in the field of literature; or a Cushing Strout or a David Brion Davis, who have taught in departments both of history and of literature, as well as in core American Studies; or a Marvin Meyers or a John William Ward, who have functioned equally well in history and in American Studies.

Such cross-departmental mobility is still possible today, but structural changes in academe have made it much more difficult. With the waning of the intellectual history synthesis and the rise of the new social history, border traffic between the disciplines of history and literature has slowed considerably. And if some historians and American Studies scholars still bring social science perspectives to their work, social scientists are substantially less involved in American Studies than they used to be.

The following case is illustrative. At a large midwestern university, with a long tradition of social science involvement in American

Studies, a member of the sociology department was being considered for tenure. The department, it seems, had worked up a rating schedule to judge scholarly publication in academic journals. *The American Sociological Review* was placed at the top of the department's list, with other journals spread out in rank order below. This particular faculty member had published an article some years back in the *American Quarterly*. For his effort, he was *penalized* by the department's rating schedule. If sociology journals were judged from high-plus down to barely-plus, journals outside the discipline were given a minus rating. Better, said the department, never to publish at all than to venture in research beyond the home discipline.

This is one way for a discipline to ward off information-overload. Granted, the department's behavior is extreme, but such academic sanctions can be effective. The warning to the roving sociologist here is clear: stay with information which fellow members of the guild can manage, and don't wander into another profession's territory.

This, I would suggest, is a prime instance of an "assembly-line mentality" in modern scholarship. Such a mentality motivates scholarly laborers to the task of producing, but it cautions them to produce only inside carefully patrolled academic boundaries. In such a situation of information-overload, interdisciplinary ventures become increasingly problematic.

THE "CONTRIBUTION-TO-KNOWLEDGE" MODEL IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Those who still look for breadth in scholarship may blanch at this assembly-line mentality—calling it intellectually blind and narrow-minded. But no mentality grows without a social structure supporting it or a social rhetoric rationalizing it. This one is no exception.

It is not a matter of intellectual blindness or personal bad faith so much as the consequence of historic commitments that have outlived their original intents. The commitments were in fact reasonable when first made, and still make some sense today. But, generally, they have not been examined by the people who now hold them. Those making scholarly decisions today—like the sociologists above—are largely unaware that their own ideal of scholarship is in fact a social convention. It is not a universal blessing of modern scholarship, but rather a particular cultural strategy originally devised to meet a particular kind of cultural situation. Today, that situation has been altered. And scholars—largely uninformed of the cultural history of their own commitments—are rendered powerless to rethink their ideals in a changed academic world.

We might try and understand how this problem developed by tak-

ing the American historical profession as an example. Prior to the late nineteenth century, American history was written mostly by amateurs. Characteristically, they were men of some wealth and leisure who worked alone, often without the support of academic institutions or professional associations. Late in the century, however—with the advent of the modern university and the development of the graduate school—historical inquiry underwent increasing organization, and collectivization. Over time, it was transformed into a professional enterprise with social rules and regulations; soon it was also to develop its own initiation rituals, sanctions of reward and punishment, and all the other social forms that characteristically accompany large-scale institutional growth.¹² In 1884 the American Historical Association was founded, and through the years the role of “historian” was substantially altered—from that of “man of letters” to that of “academician,” a scholar trained in a graduate department of history, who functions under the social discipline of a powerful fraternity.¹³

As the social role of historian and the social conditions of historical inquiry changed, so too did the intellectual commitments. Where before history writing had been seen largely as a subjective “art,” now it was becoming an objective “science.” Previously, the labor of investigative scholarship had been considered important, but that labor was subordinated to the craft of storytelling. By the early twentieth century, investigative scholarship was taken as *the* basic goal of historical inquiry, subordinate to no other aim.¹⁴ Hence every department would insist that novice historians must do “primary document” research. Such research would function, among other things, as a basic rite of passage into the profession. It was meant to set off the trained scholar in the field from the undisciplined amateur.

The transformation in historical commitments was of course not total. A Francis Parkman or a Richard Hildreth worked diligently to gather evidence before history writing became professionalized; a Samuel Eliot Morison or an Arthur Schlesinger would strive to make his history artful well after the change. Still, the basic direction of commitments was away from art toward scientific objectivity, and over the years a social rhetoric was framed in the profession to legitimize these new commitments. We can see this rhetoric almost fully formed as early as 1908, in a presidential address to the American Historical Association delivered by George Burton Adams.

“At the very beginning of the conquest of the unknown,” says Adams, “lies the fact, established and classified to the fullest extent possible at the moment.” *Facts*, to Adams, form the basic building blocks for historical inquiry. As a scholar, the historian fulfills his role through the careful accumulation and objective verification of such facts. Hence the enterprise of scholarship is made to resemble the collective building of a pyramid, with each successive laborer adding his own “contribution” to the mounting edifice.

To lay such foundations, to furnish such materials for later builders, may be a modest ambition, but it is my firm belief that in our field of inquiry, for a long time to come, the man who devotes himself to such labors, who is content with this preliminary work, will make a more useful and a more permanent contribution to the final science, or philosophy of history, than will he who yields to the allurements of speculation and endeavors to discover in the present stage of our knowledge the forces that control society, or to formulate the laws of their action.

For Adams, a clear demarcation must separate the historian as dedicated scholar from the amateur dilettante in the field: "None of the new battle cries," he proclaims, "should sound for us above the call of our first leader, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. . . . The field of the historian is, and must long remain, the discovery and recording of what actually happened."¹⁵

When he spoke in 1908, George Burton Adams must have been energized by the purity of his vision. He was committed to a worthy ideal—the historian as patient investigator into facts of the past—and he urged fellow scholars in the field to follow this commitment. That is exactly what happened. Though the American history profession has added other commitments over the years, its dedication to objective fact has hardly lessened during the seventy years since Adams spoke.¹⁶

But group commitment to an ideal is never that alone. It is also—to use a word I shall explain later—a "dense" fact. That is, it can offer clues to other facts. In this case, it indicates not only a value commitment of individual scholars, but offers insight into underlying social structures and cultural forms of American historians as a group.

Taking Adams' ideal as a "dense" fact, we can still affirm his commitment to objectivity as an admirable goal for scholarship. But we can also read this commitment as part of a functioning social rhetoric—a particular ideology rationalizing the aspirations of a particular group in a particular kind of social order in a particular stage of its development. Read this way, the rhetoric can offer insight into our present situation of information-overload in American scholarship.

As a rhetoric, the ideal of scholarly objectivity was first designed to cope with a "poverty" situation in historical understanding. In the late nineteenth century, aspiring professionals felt that much information about the past was potentially at hand, but little was actually known. To be "known," according to this rhetoric, historical facts must be run through the refining processes and testing procedures of professional scholarship. Hence Adams' rhetoric aimed to transform inert historical facts into objectified historical truths.

Facts for history were thus to function like raw materials for the economy. They must be "produced"—that is, passed through the as-

sembly line of factories of scholarship—before they are ready to be “consumed”—that is, employed by scholars for sound historical understanding.

Adams’ rhetoric also draws boundaries between the trained professional in historical understanding and the amateur. Unlike Carl Becker some years later, George Burton Adams would *not* grant that “everyman is his own historian.”¹⁷ For Adams, one becomes a historian only upon committing himself to a discipline, the discipline of scholarly objectivity. One is not a historian, as Becker would claim, simply because one is a human being obliged to live in historical time. Adams’ social rhetoric thus serves to strengthen in-group professional loyalties—it distinguishes the scholarly “historian” from, say, the nonscholarly “politician” or “journalist” or “citizen,” or from the scholarly “sociologist” or “philosopher.”

The strategy is also an ideology of expanding professionalization. In history and in other academic disciplines, it aimed to legitimize the rise to cultural power of the scholarly professions in America.¹⁸

The rhetoric of a George Burton Adams functioned as something of a “modernizing” strategy, then, for the nascent industry of historical scholarship. Originally addressed to an underdeveloped world of information, it exhorted scholarly laborers to produce—that is, to transform raw materials into finished products. Over time, it sought also to build the social institutions necessary to channel and discipline those productive energies.

The result has been a remarkable flowering of scholarly activity in twentieth-century America. In less than a century, thousands of laborers have been recruited into the enterprise; they have worked long and enthusiastically in service of their scholarly ideal, and they have transformed the modern informational landscape from “poverty” into “abundance.”

The historical profession is of course not alone in this enterprise. In many other academic professions, a rhetoric of production took hold around the turn of the century, encouraging something like a gold rush for information about their respective subjects.

As one might expect, the strategies varied from discipline to discipline. In anthropology, the “field work paradigm” of Franz Boas and others served much the same function as the “primary document” injunction of historians. For literary scholars, if not necessarily for literary critics, the New Criticism served an analogous function. And the Chicago school helped sociology move from the nineteenth-century grand theorizing of a Herbert Spencer or a Lester Ward to a modern, empirically oriented discipline concerned with stockpiling objective data about social behavior and social processes in America.¹⁹

The result is nothing short of a full-scale information revolution in American scholarship over the last hundred years. From an information-poor situation, we have moved to an information-rich one.

Where we once had an underdeveloped information industry in America, we now have a developed and powerful one.

In effect, then, the information revolution has been fought and substantially won. This does not mean, of course, that scholars should stop gathering new information; no revolution is ever total in creating a new cultural order. It does mean, however, that scholars in the field can afford to relax the battle strategies with which they fought the revolution, and can allow alternative strategies a hearing.

But the institutional momentum that was the force behind the revolution makes such relaxation difficult. There is an irony of sorts here. It is the kind of ironic paradox we scholars are driven to expose when it happens in the culture at large, but are blinded to when it happens in our own home culture of academe. It is the familiar irony of institutional inertia; a rhetoric designed for one situation outlasts that situation, and strategies that were once fresh and creative turn back upon themselves to stifle further creativity.

In contemporary academe the irony works something like this: As we grow in numbers and power, we are obliged to subdivide and specialize. This channels our minds into ever smaller areas of expertise. Then, because we are unable to judge the quality of scholarship outside our own specialty, we insist on *quantity* of publication as a measure of intellectual worth. This, of course, causes more to be published. And as the volume of information increases, we are forced to yet further specialization—all of which adds to the burden of information-overload, which necessitates further “channeling” of scholarly knowledge, and so on.

As in the modern industrial economy, so also in the modern industry of scholarship. Abundance, and the institutional powers that produce it, begets more abundance. They feed upon themselves and become self-perpetuating. The result is the same in both the economy and scholarship—our factories produce beyond our capacities to consume, they glut markets, and they continue to expand simply for the sake of expansion. In the economy, this means we pollute the environment; in scholarship, it means we similarly “pollute” minds, overextending their powers to digest and to comprehend. Seen from this perspective, the decision of the midwestern sociology department—to penalize the scholar who published outside his discipline—becomes institutionally comprehensible, if not intellectually justifiable.

“REFLEXIVE” SOCIOLOGY AND THE DAHRENDORF STRATEGY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Perhaps it is fitting that the discipline known for some of the worst absurdities in the modern information revolution—sociology—has re-

cently made concerted efforts to transcend that revolution. We might look to sociology now for an alternative to the "contribution-to-knowledge" model of scholarship, and its intellectual consequence, the burden of information-overload.

At issue here is not the entire discipline, but one part of it that has fought to break free from the ironic cycle of production noted above. The most vocal spokesman for this movement is Alvin Gouldner, whose 1970 volume *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* is a radical critique of dominant ideologies in the profession. As an alternative to the sociological establishment, Gouldner proposes "reflexive" sociology. Reflexive sociology looks back in upon itself as well as outward upon the world, it seeks to break through the wall of expertise between the professional scholar and the lay citizen, and it is concerned more with critical analysis of fundamental ideas than with further accumulation of what Gouldner calls "information bits."

Others of similar reflexive temper have urged the profession back to first principles of late. In 1959 C. Wright Mills recalled the discipline to its essential "sociological imagination." In 1966 Robert Nisbet looked back to the early nineteenth century for the basic "unit-ideas" of sociology—the ideas of "community," "authority," "status," "the sacred," "alienation." In 1963 Peter Berger published a primer in the field, which was both an introduction to the lay reader and a fresh departure for the trained professional. And in 1970 Robert Friedrichs published a comprehensive analysis of both the social structure and the social rhetoric of the discipline—for which he was awarded a major prize of the American Sociological Association.²⁰

But the most radical effort in this vein, I believe, has been Ralf Dahrendorf's essay "Homo Sociologicus," originally published in 1958. In this essay, Dahrendorf sought to strip the discipline bare, as it were—to free sociology from accumulated professional convention by in effect trying to reinvent it from the ground up. "Every discipline," he wrote, "if it is to make its statements precise and testable, must reduce its huge subject matter to certain elements from which may be constructed, if not a portrait of the reality of experience, then a structure in whose tissue a segment of reality may be caught."²¹

In his effort to reduce the discipline to basics, Dahrendorf suggested that sociology try and concentrate on the precise point, or arena, where society and the individual meet. There, he affirmed, could be found "homo sociologicus, sociological man, the basic unit of sociological analysis."²²

Taking his point of departure from Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage . . ." in *As You Like It*, Dahrendorf went on to contend that homo sociologicus is essentially man as actor—that is, "man as the bearer of socially predetermined roles."²³

For our purposes in American Studies, it is not so important that Ralf Dahrendorf fixed upon "role" as the elementary category of sociol-

ogy, but that he freed time from other scholarly labors to try and reduce the field to comprehensible form. His is a model "reflexive" temper for contemporary scholarly life.

It is that temper, I believe, which may offer relief from some of our present discontents in academe. Applied in the spirit of a Dahrendorf, a Mills, a Nisbet, a Berger, a Gouldner, it can give us perspective on our structural strains today—where strategies devised for a poverty of information are being misapplied to a state of overabundance. A reflexive temper like Dahrendorf's might also help us break free from the ironic cycle of production noted before—where the momentum of productivity overpowers our capacity to consume and digest. Such a temper might further help us cope with information-overload, and could give us room to experiment with alternatives, or at least supplements, to the dominant "contribution-to-knowledge" model of modern scholarship. In particular, it might suggest some ways out of our current state of intellectual drift in American Studies, by helping us frame a new rhetoric of the interdisciplinary appropriate to our distinctive experience of the culture.

"WHERE DOES AMERICAN STUDIES BEGIN?"

Recently, Erik Hazel has suggested that our base question in the movement should be "Where does American Studies begin?"²⁴ During the remainder of this essay, I should like to frame an answer to Hazel's question. Taking a cue from Dahrendorf, I will offer a series of elementary propositions, or working "axioms," which for me make possible an interdisciplinary culture studies.

I propose these not as *the* necessary axioms for an entire movement. Rather, in the reflexive spirit of Dahrendorf, Mills, Nisbet, and Hazel, I believe we in American Studies should make our working assumptions visible and communicable, and these are mine.²⁵

They are purposely general. They leave out many specific problems in American culture studies. My aim is not to be comprehensive with these axioms; but, taking a cue from Dahrendorf, I want to try and probe under the field, and attempt to reduce it to fundamentals, as I see them.

Further, I have phrased the axioms in brief, dogmatic form. They are intended at this stage to prod and generate dialogue. No doubt, over time qualifications will come. But now is the time to be clear and direct. Let ambiguities be added later.

Also, they are a *working* set of axioms, offered in an experimental spirit. A reflexive American Studies does not need a checklist of unexamined commandments. Rather, it needs working goals to try out and inspect and continually revise over time.

Finally, my aim is not to suggest a totally new departure for culture studies scholarship. As the following examples indicate, everything proposed here has already been done by someone somewhere. But many of these examples lack visibility, pattern, and cumulative development in the field. By bringing them together into a single cluster, I hope they may offer us a fresh way to think about our activities and some leverage to do our scholarly labors in new ways.

SOME ELEMENTARY AXIOMS FOR AN AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES

The first four axioms are *cultural* ones, propositions about the nature and structure of experience.

1. *INQUIRERS IN AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES SHOULD LOOK NOT FOR FACTS IN EXPERIENCE, BUT FOR "DENSE" FACTS—facts which both reveal deeper meanings inside themselves, and point outward to other facts, other ideas, other meanings.*

As a first operating assumption in American Studies, we should affirm the cultural "density" of experience. We should focus our sights, and insights, on those facts which are potentially most packed with meanings, which promise to reveal things beyond their manifest surface.

This assumption may seem unexceptionable enough. But it has consequences radically at odds with the predominant "contribution-to-knowledge" model of modern scholarship. For in that model, facts are seen as self-contained, and are assumed more or less to speak for themselves. They are handled as hard, substantial, irreducible, and, in the vision of a George Burton Adams, they form the basic building blocks for the pyramid of scholarship.

But if Adams' "lean" facts speak for themselves, "dense" facts never do. Dense facts always require an interpreting mind—to search out their inner meanings, and to explore their outer connections.

In the dense-facts model, that a work of scholarship makes a "contribution" to knowledge is less important than that it reveals information meanings that had not been seen before. The dense-facts model is committed less to the "production" of new information and more to effective "consumption"—that is, to the fuller intellectual digestion of whatever information is at hand.

Facts of course are seldom "lean" or "dense" by themselves. They are so mostly by perception. Hence the dense-facts model requires an altered attitude toward information. The lean-facts model concentrates on the act of accumulation, and rewards laborers in the field for discovering things which had not been known before. The dense-facts

model focuses not only on information in the world, but also on the perceiving and conceiving mind; it judges that mind basically on what it can do with its information, not on the volume of information it has accumulated.

Kai Erikson's handling of the Anne Hutchinson trial—in his book, *Wayward Puritans*—is an example of a dense-facts approach. In his discussion, Erikson offers no new information; he restricts himself to what is already known about the history of Massachusetts Bay. Clearly, professional historians of the period "know" more about that history than he does. But as a sociologist, Erikson can see meanings in historical facts that professionally trained historians had passed over. As a specialist in modes of deviance, Erikson uses the idea of "social boundary situations" to explain what he believes happened in the trial. He handles the Hutchinson trial as a crisis of social identity early in the colony's history, a cultural drama where the outer limits of acceptable behavior were being redrawn.²⁶

The point is not that Kai Erikson's interpretation is correct, and previous historical treatments incorrect. Both Erikson's and previous explanations may be equally accurate, or inaccurate. The point is that as a sociologist acculturated outside the discipline of history, Kai Erikson can offer scholars of the American past a fresh way to read some familiar documents. And by using the idea of social-boundary situations, he gives scholars a useful tool to gain leverage on other materials in other periods of the American past. In this sense, the facts of the Hutchinson trial become saturated with cultural potential for students of American experience.

Hence, a first priority for American Studies should be to try and unpack the potential densities in our cultural facts and artifacts. For this axiom, we may take a cue from what William Rueckert once wrote of Kenneth Burke: "Burke reduces the number of things to look for but increases the number of ways to look for them."²⁷

2. IN AN ONGOING CULTURE, EXPERIENCES ARE INTER-CONNECTED ONE WITH ANOTHER. *A distinctive task of American Studies should be to trace those interconnections through cultural experience, connections which the compartmentalizing of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines has tended to obscure or block.*

As students of American culture, we should assume that any kind of experience we begin to penetrate—be it a poem, a social movement, a building, an individual personality, a film, a political speech, a social institution, a stock-car race, or whatever—connects out to other kinds of experiences. We need not go all the way with Barry Commoner in his first law of ecology—that "everything is connected to everything else"—but we can assume that everything is connected to *something* else.²⁸ Further, like Commoner and the ecological movement he represents, we might try and reward not the "producing mind"—which func-

tions to accumulate information—but the “connecting mind”—which inquires how things on one level of experience relate to things on other levels.²⁹

Take, for example, Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge*. In that study, Trachtenberg moves from the bridge as a physical artifact to the technology and social organization of bridge building to the urban politics of bridge finance to the personality dynamics of the bridge builders to the aesthetics of the bridge as a poetic symbol to the bridge as an expression of deep mythic yearnings in American culture.³⁰ Or take Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. The “fit” Martin Luther experiences in the choir becomes for Erikson a focal point for exploring the basic personality structure of young Luther, his father and mother, the social-class structure of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Germany, economic transformations in western Europe at the time, the state of the medieval Catholic church and strains put upon it by incipient Protestantism, and, in a wider sense, the strains of youth and the agonies of identity in the modern world.³¹

Obviously, this second axiom builds upon the first. We need to “connect” from one area of experience to another precisely because cultural facts are “dense.” The converse is also true; as the “connecting mind” perceives facts as dense, the “producing mind” perceives them as lean.

In the “contribution-to-knowledge” model of scholarship, lean facts tend to crowd out dense ones. Laborers are kept so busy discovering a multitude of facts that they get distracted from pondering the meanings of any particular one. Hence the decision of the midwestern sociology department noted before. This decision implied that sociological facts are sociological, and that alone. The department's behavior is symptomatic of a tendency in modern scholarship to remove one's home discipline from all the rest. For when the several academic disciplines became committed to professionalization late in the nineteenth century, and to the accumulation of objective information about the world, each tended to disconnect itself from all the others. Such separatist behavior was effective for building in-group solidarity, so that laborers in the field could take pride in their identities as “historians” not “philosophers,” or “literary critics” not “sociologists.” For a time, this pride in disciplinary separateness was functional to a developing information industry. But it is less functional now in an already developed world, where it serves to block our vision of the interconnectedness of things in cultural experience and where it exacerbates the situation of information-overload.

3. *DESPITE MASSIVE INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES TO SEE IT OTHERWISE, THE FIRST AND FINAL BASE OF AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES MUST BE NOT IN THE DEPARTMENTS OF ACADEME, BUT IN ONGOING EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE.*

Again, this axiom seems unexceptionable; no one would deny that the purpose of American culture studies is to explain American culture. But like many general truisms, this one is honored in the abstract but frequently ignored in the concrete.

Academe is a powerful socializing institution, especially for its lifetime inhabitants. It filters the world for scholars, who are tempted to confuse its institutional realities with reality itself. Also, the comforts and rewards of scholarship go mainly to those taking their cues from inside professional guild boundaries, not to those who venture outside.³²

Not that this axiom is intended to be anti-intellectual or anti-academic. It simply calls for priorities, first things first. It aims to encourage the primal act of intellect—the working of mind upon experience—and it subordinates all else in organized scholarship to that act. This “experience” axiom would employ the existing institutions of academe as a valuable support system for culture studies, but it would reject their claims to be the sole route to legitimate scholarship.³³

Such claims are hard to resist even in American Studies, where the power of the scholarly professions is felt less keenly than elsewhere. Indeed, the single most influential essay in the field—Henry Nash Smith’s 1957 article “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?”—concludes that we have no method for the field because there is no independent scholarly base in which to ground it.

Smith’s argument is revealing. He notes that the field of literature is too preoccupied with internal analysis of texts to be concerned with cultural surroundings; and the social sciences are preoccupied with external matters of social structure and statistical frequency and cannot penetrate to internal subtleties of cultural expression. Smith concludes that the gap between the two professions is too great to be bridged. Hence, his is a counsel of resignation; scholars in American Studies should remain with the traditional departments, but try to nudge their outer boundaries a little³⁴—which is what Henry Nash Smith has done in his own scholarly career, spent mostly in the department of literature at Berkeley.

Smith’s analysis of the rift between literature and the social sciences was accurate in 1957, and it still is today. But his advice to scholars in American Studies—stay inside the departments—need not follow from that analysis. Though acutely conscious of the gap between academic approaches to the culture and the culture itself, Smith still takes academe and not the culture as his preeminent reality. Thus his essay not only begins with the dominant institutions of scholarship, it ends there too.

It is a paradox that in a brief side journey in his essay—analyzing the impact of censorship on the works of Mark Twain—Smith shows, in fact, that interdisciplinary scholarship *can* be done. With a problem di-

rectly in front of him, he simply proceeds to integrate disparate perspectives, with no particular problem. But later, when he comes to *generalize* on the issue of method for American Studies, Smith wholly neglects the integrative method he has already in fact worked out on Twain. His handling of Twain offers a distinctive method for the field; and it does this because it focuses first and finally on the *experience* of Mark Twain, bringing in scholarly conventions only when instrumental to explaining that experience. But later when he proposes to write of method generally, Smith abandons his grounding in concrete experience, and goes almost entirely with the conventional institutions of academe.

The experience of the 1960s has intervened between Henry Nash Smith's 1957 essay and the present. And the sixties—a decade where events in the culture broke through departmental walls to confound academized categories—should have taught us a lesson. We can find that lesson in many places in academe, but it is perhaps best dramatized outside—in the advent of New Journalism, or what I call “cultural journalism.”

The richest perspectives on our recent cultural past have come not from academicians working inside the traditions of scholarship, but from a Frances Fitzgerald (*Fire in the Lake*), a David Halberstam (*The Best and the Brightest*), a Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), and preeminently from a Gary Wills (*Nixon Agonistes*).³⁵ We could search long through the American past before we could find four scholarly works that so brilliantly illuminate the experience and meaning of a single decade. That they were all researched and written by journalists should give us pause about our traditional scholarly dismissal of some work as “mere journalism.” Scholars in American culture studies could well learn from the methods, and the intellectual priorities, of these nonacademic journalists. And their first priority is that culture is grounded basically in ongoing human experience, not in the disciplinary categories of academe.

4. HOWEVER MUCH WE ARE PROMPTED TO INTEGRATE, WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT OURS IS A PLURALISTIC CULTURE, WITH MULTIPLE REALITIES FUNCTIONING ON A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT, OFTEN CONFLICTING, LEVELS.

Unlike the earlier axioms, this one is unexceptionable, at least for our own time. The experience of the 1960s has obligated us to look not only for coherence and consensus in American culture, but also for conflict, division, and anomaly.

Recent scholars in and around American culture studies are well aware of this message. One thinks of ethnic history, of new radical history, of women's history—with their apprehension of deep conflict and their emphasis on divisions between the powerful and the powerless in American society. Or of new social history and new political history—

with their concern for statistical proportions rather than indivisible essences in American experience. Or of Cecil Tate's, Bruce Kuklick's, and Gordon Kelly's recent critiques of cultural holism in past American Studies scholarship.³⁶ Or of a work like Robert Wiebe's *The Segmented Society*, which articulates a theory of the pluralist dynamics in American social history.³⁷ Or of the entire literary-humanist heritage in western culture studies, with its rich sense of complexity and ambiguity in human experience.³⁸ Or of conceptual tools recently made available from the natural and social sciences—e.g., Thomas Kuhn on "anomaly," Lewis Coser on "conflict" theory, Kai Erikson on the idea of "social boundaries."³⁹

Today, then, the operative cultural question is not the 1950s concern for essences—"What is the American Character?"—rather, it is the more permeable: "On what levels do what kinds of people share what, and how and why and in what situations?" Such a question is a variation of Henry Murray's dictum: "Each man is like all other men, like some other men, like no other man."

This fourth axiom functions as a check on axiom 2, the "connecting" axiom. It cautions against the temptation to overconnect, linking things which are not linked in fact. As we connect, this axiom warns, we should not assume that *everything* in American culture is connected to everything else, along the same level. That was a shortcoming in some symbol-myth-image scholarship of the past—especially works like Charles Sanford's *The Quest for Paradise*, or John William Ward's *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*.⁴⁰ It is a shortcoming avoided by most culture studies scholarship today.

The next four axioms are *methodological*, on ways of handling experience.

5. ANY EXPERIENCE IN A CULTURE CAN BE SEEN AS A FOCAL POINT FOR A SERIES OF "CONCENTRIC FIELDS" CONNECTING WITH EACH OTHER. *Holists to the contrary, people do not live wholly in the larger culture, but rather the culture is filtered to them through an array of intermediary influences.*

This is especially a tenet of new social historians, who assume that the larger world is filtered to people through mediating institutions—especially the family, but also the ethnic group, the geographical region, the occupational group, the sex role, the reference audience, and so on. "Field," then, is a metaphor for those filters; it is a middle-range variable between the culture at large and particular experiences.

This axiom is illustrated in Lee Benson's book, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*. Previous historians had claimed that the behavior of Americans in the late 1820s and 1830s could be explained by reference to the over-arching political values of the age, namely a generalized commitment to the Jacksonian ideology. Hence they would

write of "the age of Jackson," or "the Jacksonian persuasion," or of "Andrew Jackson: symbol for an age."⁴¹ But Lee Benson rejects such broad-gauge explanations. For him, few people ever lived in the age as a whole, or experienced the Jacksonian ideology pure. Instead, the age came to them filtered through mediating influences. Thus the area in New York State most consistently supporting Andrew Jackson—Rockland County—did so not because it agreed with Jackson's political values, but because the provincial Dutch farmers there still resented Alexander Hamilton and the federal Constitution of a half-century before, and they voted against Jackson's opponents, the Whigs, because they thought them latter-day Hamiltonians.⁴²

Gordon Kelly's recent critique of symbol-myth-image scholarship also illustrates this "field" axiom. In his excellent article "Literature and the Historian," Kelly rejects the symbol-myth-image habit of reading the culture directly from inside works of literature. To get from literature to the wider culture, Kelly insists we cannot move in a straight line. Instead, we must embark on a long, circuitous journey taking us through the personality and background of the artist, the social role of the artist and changing demands on that role, the social makeup of the artist's audience, and so on. For Gordon Kelly, literature holds no "privileged" position as a key to the culture. Instead he handles literature like any other kind of cultural communication, and insists we consider the array of institutional forms through which such communications are invariably filtered.⁴³

In each case, then, we have a variation of the "field" axiom—the idea that human experience takes place within a range of particular environments, or surrounds. The idea of "concentric fields" builds on this by suggesting that any given surround is connected to many others. In effect, we can picture these fields as raying out from the center in wider and wider circles. In culture studies, then, a single experience becomes a focal point for studying an ever widening field of influences.

This axiom is intended to give form to axiom 2, the "connecting" axiom. That axiom says experiences are interconnected, one with another. This one says they are connected not only as single experiences, but in patterns, or in our term "fields." A distinctive task of American culture studies, then, is to locate connecting links among these concentric fields in experience.

We might also try shifting focus slightly as we envision our own discipline—from thinking of American Studies as the holistic "American Culture Studies" to thinking of it as the more particular and grounded "Cultural Field Studies." This would tap us more directly into what is happening in social history, also to the more general ecological consciousness of our time.

6. EACH EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM IN A CULTURE HAS ITS

OWN DISTINCTIVE FORMS; THE TASK OF THE CULTURE CRITIC MUST BE TO LEARN THE FORMS CHARACTERISTIC OF EACH MEDIUM. Following from axiom 5, we can say that everything we look at is "filtered"; the point is to know each filter and its forms.

When I was a graduate student in American Studies, I remember querying one of my literature professors about a course that would teach me what is "American" about American poetry. He responded that perhaps I should learn what is "poetic" about poetry first.

He was right. At least as important as learning the information of any field of inquiry is learning the distinctive *forms* of that field's experience.

Here the New Criticism offers an important message. For it has insisted that we try to understand what is distinctively "literary" about literature before we can understand literature in its cultural context. When New Critics also went on to claim that literature is nothing but literature, they erred. But up to a point, they did have the priorities set correctly.

The new social history makes a similar point. It urges historians to expand their perspectives and learn from social science about the distinctive *social* forms and functions of human institutions—the family, the town, the city, the occupation, and so on. This is a shortcoming, I believe, of Edmund Morgan's 1944 study of *The Puritan Family*. In that book, Morgan tried to explain the behavior of a social institution wholly through use of "literary" sources, that is, through what people *wrote* about the family. More recent studies by Philip Greven, John Demos, and Kenneth Lockridge have improved on Morgan by looking at the distinctively social functions of New England family behavior, and by using distinctively sociological and anthropological methods.⁴⁴

In intellectual history studies, Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* also illustrates this "form" axiom. Bailyn describes the pattern of ideas which he believes helped spark the Revolution. Instead of moving directly into the ideas, however, Bailyn opens with a chapter discussing the cultural media through which those ideas were communicated. He briefly notes the media of newspapers, broadsides, and almanacs; then he concentrates on political pamphlets as the most basic of forms expressing the pre-Revolutionary ideology. The pamphlets, he notes, were a flexible medium capable of responding quickly to political events as they happened. Hence, for Bernard Bailyn, political-cultural change was rapid in the years between 1763 and 1776 partly because the forms communicating that change were so flexible and responsive.⁴⁵

7. THE DISTINCTIVE AMERICAN STUDIES PROCESS OF INQUIRY SHOULD BE NOT AN ACT OF "DISCOVERING" DATUMS OF INFORMATION, BUT A STRATEGIC "JOURNEY"⁴⁶ THROUGH CONCENTRIC FIELDS OF EXPERIENCE.

Cultural inquiry should be envisioned as an ongoing process, where the inquirer is in motion, traveling through and around the subject. And subjects in culture studies should be conceived not in singles, but in multiples. The cultural subject consists of many layers, or "fields," of experience, and inquiry must pass back and forth through a number of those layers.

When we consider inquiry into a cultural subject, we should not think just of going to "find out" about it. *How* we study something should be at least as important as *what* we study. Thus we should conceive our subjects not as bounded "topics" but as focal points of reference in a "cultural journey" of inquiry. In approaching our subject of choice, we should not only look straight at it but travel around and beyond it, watching how it connects into concentric fields raying from its center outwards. We should therefore cultivate a "perspectivistic" method in culture studies—a method encouraging us to look at a single thing from a variety of viewpoints, on a variety of levels, employing a variety of methods.

Henry Nash Smith's treatment of the virgin-land myth illustrates this journey axiom. In approaching that myth, Smith travels through fields of politics, popular culture, literature, biography, and economics; and he employs different methods of inquiry appropriate to each field of experience. The result is not *a* story of *an* experience, but an exploring of interlinkages among disparate fields of the American cultural past.⁴⁷

Modern novelists, of course, have been doing this for some time. In *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, William Faulkner does not simply narrate the story of the Compson family. Rather, he renders that family's history from four different, often competing, perspectives. The perspectives differ not only in *what* they experience, but in *how* they experience, and in how they *communicate* their experience. This obliges Faulkner to create multiple methods as well as multiple viewpoints in telling the family's story.⁴⁸

Students of culture could learn from William Faulkner's example, and from that of other modern novelists. Robert Berkhofer emphasizes this point when he writes: "The older omniscient viewpoint adopted by the great literary historians of the past must be superseded by a multiple viewpoint in new expository form. Just as novelists discovered new forms of exposition through patient experimentation, so too historians who would relate chronicles must search for new ways of telling their stories."⁴⁹

8. IT IS NOT SO CRUCIAL WHERE WE FOCUS IN STUDYING A CULTURE, BUT IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL THAT WE DO HAVE A FOCUS. CONTEMPORARY CULTURES ARE MUCH TOO LARGE TO BE TAKEN IN WHOLE.

The traditional disciplines, of course, have heeded part of this

"focus" axiom for a long time. For them, focusing has been a necessary strategy to cope with information-overload and to make for division of academic labor.

Their mode of focus, however, has resulted in consequences that outran their original intents. Disciplinarians have been tempted to believe their particular territory of focus—whether it is psychological or economic or sociological or political—is the *only* legitimate one. And disciplines have tended to make their special focus an end in itself, so that, say, politics becomes not simply one dimension of experience for some political scientists, but for them experience *is* political. The same is true for many sociologists and economists and psychologists and historians.

This "focus" axiom suggests a different strategy. It insists on focus not as a way to build fences around our subjects, but again—as in axiom 7—as a point of bearing and reference in a cultural journey of inquiry. Focus is a strategy for reducing the culture to manageable size; but it also tries to keep the smaller parts from becoming unreal, not alive. We can do this by conceiving our particular subject as a focal point for a field of influences, a convenient arena to check out cultural experience, and a place in which to ground our explanations of it.

This is what Edmund Morgan does in his recent book *American Slavery, American Freedom*. His intent is to study the general American paradox of chattel slavery in a culture ostensibly committed to human freedom. But he focuses that study on a particular history of colonial Virginia. Morgan does not "reduce" the general cultural paradox just to Virginia, however; rather, he expands our sense of Virginia by considering it in the context of the wider paradox. Hence we can see the larger American paradox in microcosm as we look at colonial Virginia. And we can see also how Edmund Morgan has handled a massive problem in cultural explanation by paring it down to manageable size.⁵⁰

In his article "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight" John William Ward does something similar. In a mere fourteen pages, Ward discusses (1) the general American attraction to mythic heroes; (2) the ritual cycle in American cultural history of pessimistic jeremiads followed by optimistic covenant renewals; and (3) the twentieth-century conflict between a rhetorical heritage of frontier individualism and the collectivizing restraints of industrial technology. But Ward does not approach these cultural themes holistically; rather, he handles them as condensed in the dramatic case of Lindbergh's 1927 flight across the Atlantic and the subsequent response of Americans to it.⁵¹

Lee Benson similarly focuses when he seeks to test the general historian's concept of Jacksonian Democracy, but concentrates his study on the act of voting in particular districts of New York State. And Gary Wills employs a strategy of focus by using the character of Richard Nixon to witness the crisis of the self-made man in American

culture. In all these cases, the actual subject of inquiry is small, but the subject is expanded by asking large questions of it.

The final two axioms are on strategies of scholarship.

9. SCHOLARSHIP IN AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS A SERIES OF DISCRETE "CONTRIBUTIONS"—LIKE BUILDING BLOCKS IN A PYRAMID—BUT, RATHER, A SERIES OF DIALOGUES—TRANSACTIONS WITH AN UNFINISHED, AND INHERENTLY UNFINISHABLE, WORLD OF CULTURAL EXPERIENCE.

This axiom assumes that the world of cultural reality is incomplete, and necessarily incompletionable. This is true not only of the present and the future, but of the past as well. For the cultural past is never over with, but is always subject to reinterpretation from fresh angles of vision.

This "dialogue" axiom has several consequences for scholarship. First, we should not be inclined to dismiss a work simply because "it raises more questions than it answers." That may be a just criticism in the contribution-to-knowledge model, concerned as it is with plugging gaps in our ignorance of things. But in a reflexive, dialogue-oriented scholarship, questions well raised are as important as definitive answers. Indeed, a study *should* raise questions it cannot answer, if it does so in a disciplined way, which stimulates other inquirers to go beyond it.

Which brings us to another consequence of this axiom. In the contribution-to-knowledge model, scholars frequently aim for the "definitive" study—the work which, done properly, says all there is to know about a particular subject. Such aspirations to comprehensiveness make sense within the pyramid-building concerns of the contribution-to-knowledge model. In that model, particular works of scholarship function as building blocks, and it is obviously efficient to have the blocks built correctly—that is, solidly—the first time around.

It should be equally obvious that definitive studies are not only impossible to achieve in the world of dialogue-scholarship, they are not even desirable as an intellectual aim. In fact, the whole idea of "definitive"—with its static sense of reality and its even more static sense of human knowledge—should be banished from our vocabulary in culture studies, especially from our journal reviews.

Let me not overstate the case here. There are good things to be said about cumulative, "paradigm-induced" scholarship, and Thomas Kuhn says many of them in his influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I just don't believe American Studies should emulate the larger professional organizations in attempting that kind of scholarship. We are small and flexible enough to aspire for something different—to offer not a full-scale replacement of the dominant model,

but rather a needed supplement. Besides, the scholarly knowledge industry will continue to flourish without our encouragement; it should be established securely enough by now to allow alternative positions a hearing.

Here, I believe, the *American Quarterly* has served the field poorly. Although its summer supplements and its theme-oriented issues of late are deserving of praise, the *Quarterly* has never sought to develop forums for dialogue in the field. It even refuses something as simple as letters to the editor. Hence scholarship in American Studies is mostly unanswered scholarship. It is often years before an idea tendered to the field ever gets a scholarly response, if it is responded to at all. At the level of published scholarship and scholarly response, then, American Studies is paradoxically one of the least dialogue-oriented fields in academe.

10. *SCHOLARSHIP IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS, BUT WE MUST NOT TAKE OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY. WE SHOULD REMIND OURSELVES THAT "PLAY" OF MIND AS WELL AS WORK OF MIND IS NECESSARY TO UNDERSTANDING. BESIDES, IT IS HEALTHIER!*

Because of what the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann call the inherent "world-openness" of the human situation, there can never be a perfect fit between mind and world.⁵² That is, experience itself is necessarily at some remove from our explanations of it. And if our explanations may over time grow more sophisticated, so also does our apprehension of experience; hence the unbridgeable gap remains. Furthermore, every now and then experience throws up roadblocks against our previous explanations of it, and we are forced to detour and sometimes build entirely new roads, in our ongoing encounter with the world.

All of which means that we must continually rearrange things—"play" with the world, as it were—to get it to respond to our own questions and preoccupations. If that play often becomes a deadly serious business in scholarship, we should not let ourselves forget the gamelike quality at its heart.

Indeed, we can find this playful spirit in many of the historic classics of culture studies. Take, for example, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber argues that the religious dynamic of Protestantism functioned to release the structural forces of modern capitalism. In effect, he claims that in the early modern world religious change "caused" economic change. But as he nears the conclusion of his book, Weber pauses to acknowledge he is not certain that this is true *in fact*. Rather, he says let us "play like" it is true, and see what we can learn from the game. Then he suggests it would be interesting to take the opposite assumption—that economic change "caused" religious change—and see what could be learned from that

game too. This is precisely what R. H. Tawney did some two decades later in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Sober scholars claimed that Tawney's position "disputes" Weber; but they neglected to see that Weber was flexible enough to encourage both positions, contradictory as they may seem.⁵³

Or take the first of Perry Miller's "New England Mind" volumes—*The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939). The book is notoriously complicated and demanding; it may be the most intimidating work in the whole corpus of American historical scholarship. Yet at the heart of Miller's intellectual labors is a child-like innocence, a "let's pretend" attitude toward reality. Again, sober scholars have misread the message. Critics charge that Miller "distorted" reality in that volume, making of New England beliefs a monolith, with no change or deviation during all the seventeenth century. But that is precisely what he intended; in effect, Perry Miller commanded "Mind" to stand still in that volume, so he could investigate it with his intellectual microscope and probe for its underlying structures. He never claimed that New England minds *in fact* never moved throughout the century; he only said he would play as if they did for purposes of that particular volume. And, like Max Weber, Miller noted so, in his preface. The fruits of his intellectual game were to pay off in his sequel volume of 1953, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, which clearly does handle change and deviation in Puritan beliefs. Miller could chart changes of mind more profoundly in volume 2 because he so carefully had set up that mind's basic structure in volume 1.⁵⁴

In more recent American culture studies scholarship, John Caughey assumes a "playful" stance when he urges historians to attempt fabricating documents of the past, as an exercise in imaginatively entering the belief systems of historic cultures. And Gordon Kelly also urges play, when he says we might address a novel from the past as a kind of anthropological field report; the task of the literary-culture critic is to try and reconstruct the anthropologist's questions for which the novel itself provides the answers.⁵⁵

And, finally, that classic of all culture studies classics—Plato's *Republic*—is fundamentally a work of play. Plato defines "justice" in that work not by going at it directly, but by setting out to create a whole cast of characters, a script, and even a full-scale social order. *The Republic* is powerful because its author knew he must toy with the world if it were to yield the kinds of responses he wanted.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PRAXIS FOR AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES

This cluster of axioms for a "reflexive" scholarship has several

consequences—consequences for individuals working in American culture studies, consequences for programs in the field, and finally consequences for the larger field itself.

First, for individuals involved in American Studies inquiry, it urges the idea of the "cultural journey." In capsule form, that journey would look something like this to the individual taking it: (a) *focusing* in on an experience in the culture; (b) identifying the various *fields* surrounding that experience; (c) learning the distinctive *forms* or *expressive media* of each field; (d) *connecting* the fields one to another; and (e) trying not to be too assured that when one has it all done, one in fact has it *all* done.

We should also acknowledge, however, that in a reflexive American Studies, a working set of principles is just that, goals to work for and not hard and fast rules. No one could possibly hold all these axioms in mind at the same time; it would be futile to try. The whole package is much too bulky for individuals to lug around for every one of their cultural inquiries.

But we can recognize that each particular explanation of experience, and each mode of inquiry, has a limited "range of convenience"—applying here but not there.⁵⁶ Thus, we might envision the cultural inquirer like a traveler packing for a trip. A whole wardrobe of explanations and modes of inquiry is available to the cultural traveler. The task of the individual is, given the particular cultural journey she or he is to take on any given subject, to know what particular explanations and methods to bring along in one's intellectual suitcase.

To outfit the individual embarking on a cultural journey, the larger field of American culture studies should seek to develop a *working inventory, or repertory, of alternative methods and explanations*—with a clear sense of the particular range of convenience of each. That is, American Studies should cultivate a body of criticism directed to what each cultural explanation or method does best and what it does least.

The field should also develop a *working inventory, or repertory, of cultural forms*—with a sense of what particular experiences, sources, and methods are distinctive to each form. That is, what can a poem reveal about a culture that a political speech cannot? Or what can study of an individual personality tell us that an aggregate family study cannot?

This would further necessitate that individual programs in American Studies develop a *sense of the precise points and channels of interconnection among the various disciplines outside the core*. To reduce the burden of information-overload and to make for less wasted energy in their studies, students should know *where* to look for what they need inside a given discipline, instead of just being told to "take" subject matter courses in history, or literature, or what have you, and over time find out for themselves.

The whole package, finally, is intended to make a case for *method* in American culture studies. As suggested here, "method" is not that fear of many in the movement—a potential tyranny of scholarship where everyone in the field is told to conform to a single Way. Method, rather, means simply thinking about what we are doing, in more or less systematic fashion. As proposed here, it aims to cultivate a radical form of self-consciousness, crystallized in the word "reflexive."

This paper offers not method itself but a prolegomenon to method, a cluster of working assumptions out of which concrete methods in time may be developed. What I hope eventually for the field of American culture studies is a kind of "selective pluralism" of approaches, a pluralism sufficiently informed and reflective to avoid mere eclecticism. These axioms, then, are intended as a step in that direction. They are one response to Erik Hazel's earlier question, "Where does American Studies begin?" And it begins here by trying to pattern a fresh rhetoric of the interdisciplinary after the watershed cultural experience of the last decade.

NOTES

1. A thorough review of this problem, with some suggestions for solution, can be found in Robert Sklar, "The Search for an American Studies 'Philosophy': A Bibliography of New Directions," *American Quarterly*, 27 (August 1975), 245-62.

2. For the intellectual functions of paradigms in scholarly communities, see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 10-51.

3. To date, there is no comprehensive history of the American Studies movement, though Pershing Vartanian is working on one. Cecil Tate has written the only book-length study, a critique of symbol-myth-image works of the 1940s and 1950s. See *The Search for a Method in American Studies* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1973). See also, for aspects of the movement's history, Robert Sklar, "American Studies and the Realities of America," *American Quarterly*, 22 (Summer 1970), 597-605; Robert Spiller, "Value and Method in American Studies," in Joel Mickelson, ed., *American Personality and the Creative Arts* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Burgess Press, 1969), pp. 1-15; Spiller, "Unity and Diversity in the Study of American Culture: The American Studies Association in Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 25 (December 1973), 611-18; and Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly*, 31 (forthcoming Summer 1979). Finally, for the wider cultural context out of which academic American Studies was born in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1951); and Warren Susman's introduction to *Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945* (New York: Braziller, 1973), pp. 1-24.

4. See the 1970 summer supplement to the *American Quarterly*, which describes the historical evolution of several American Studies programs in the country. See especially the program descriptions of Yale, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Amherst.

5. For critiques of the intellectual consensus within which these works were produced, see Richard Sykes, "American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and a Method," *American Quarterly*, 15 (Summer 1963), 253-70; Robert Sklar, "American Studies"; Cecil Tate, *Search for a Method*; Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, 24 (October 1972), 435-50; Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly*, 26 (Spring 1974), 141-59; and Robert Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," *Social Science Quarterly*, 53, No. 2 (September 1972), 297-320. For a latter-day defense of this consensus, see Leo Marx, "American Studies: Defense of an 'Unscientific' Method," *New Literary History*, 1 (October 1969), 75-90.

6. The fullest account of the 1960s and the shattering of an American cultural consensus is William O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of the 1960's* (New York: Quadrangle, 1971).

7. For a review of historical scholarship in the 1940s and 1950s, see John Higham, "The Rise of American Intellectual History," *American Historical Review*, 56 (April 1951), 453-71. For the more recent situation, see Gene Wise, "The Decline of Intellectual History Studies," *CLIO*, 4 (Fall 1975), 55-71; and Samuel Hays, "A Systematic Social History," in *American History: Retrospect and Prospect*, eds., George Billias and Gerald Grob (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1971), pp. 315-66.

8. For evidence of recent growth and continued vitality in the movement, see Charles Bassett, "Undergraduate and Graduate American Studies Programs in the United States," *American Quarterly*, 27 (August 1975), 306-30.

9. I have written at greater length on these two positions in "Paradigm Dramas."

10. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 350-55.

11. See Fritz Machlup, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962).

12. See Gene Wise, "Historical Thought and the 'Invisible Governments' of Scholarship," *Reviews in American History*, 2 (December 1974), 568-75.

13. For a study of this transformation in the historical enterprise, see John Higham, *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 6-51.

14. For the two types of history writing during the early and late nineteenth century, see David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, Parkman* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1959); and Jurgen Herbst, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965).

15. George Burton Adams, "History and the Philosophy of History," cited in W. Stull Holt, "The Idea of Scientific History in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1 (June 1940), 359-60.

16. For a philosophical analysis of this mind-set in the profession, see Bruce Kuklick, "The Mind of the Historian," *History and Theory*, 8 (Fall 1969), 315 ff.

17. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review*, 37 (January 1932), 221-36.

18. For an analysis of how the academic professions have risen to power in twentieth-century America, see Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968). See also Henrika Kuklick, "The Organization of Social Science in the United States," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Spring 1976), 124-41. For the late nineteenth-century transition in the scholar's role from amateur to professional, see Thomas Haskell's brilliant study, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social*

Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977).

19. For Franz Boas and the "field work paradigm" in anthropology, see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1968), pp. 250-318; and Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Paradigmatic Processes in Culture Change," *American Anthropologist*, 74 (June 1972), 469. For a radical critique of this tradition, see the essays in Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Vintage, 1974). For the Chicago School and its impact on the discipline, see Robert Farris, *Chicago Sociology, 1920-1932* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970). For the wider cultural context in which this information revolution has taken place, see Daniel Bell, "The Tableau of Social Change—Today and Tomorrow," *The Reforming of General Education* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 69-143.

20. Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959); Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966); Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1963); Robert Friedrichs, *A Sociology of Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1970). Friedrichs' book won the Sorokin Award of the American Sociological Association in 1971.

21. Ralf Dahrendorf, "Homo Sociologicus: On the History, Significance, and Limits of the Category of Social Role," in *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 22.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

24. Erik Hazel, "Where Does American Studies Begin?" graduate journal in American Studies 681, Case Western Reserve Univ., Fall 1972.

25. For an early example of a similar genre, see Arthur O. Lovejoy's agenda for the field of intellectual history, "Reflections on the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1 (January 1940), 1-24.

26. Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), pp. 71-107.

27. William Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 22.

28. Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Bantam, 1962), p. 29.

29. For excellent advice on how to employ this "connecting" temper when moving outside one's home discipline, see Richard Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," in *The Varieties of History*, ed., Fritz Stern (New York: Meridian, 1956), pp. 359-70.

30. Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965).

31. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

32. The most substantial critique in the field of the power of academe's conventions—with suggestions on how to transcend them—is Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth, and David Wilson, "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," *American Quarterly*, 25 (October 1973), 353-89.

33. I am presently at work on a book-length project developing this "experience-explanation" strategy at greater length. The present essay is part of that project. The book is to be titled *Experience and Explanation in American Culture Studies: An Interdisciplinary Strategy for Inquiry*.

34. Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly*, 9 (Summer 1957), 197-208.

35. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1973); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Crest, 1973); Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Bantam, 1968); Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-made Man* (New York: Signet, 1971).

36. Tate, *Search for a Method*; Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol"; Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian."

37. Robert Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975).

38. A clear articulation of this heritage can be found in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950).

39. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; Lewis Loser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956); Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*.

40. Charles Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1962); John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955).

41. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1957); Ward, *Andrew Jackson*.

42. Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961).

43. Kelly, "Literature and the Historian."

44. Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (Boston Public Library, 1944); Philip Greven, *Four Generations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970); Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

45. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967)—see Chap. 1, "The Literature of Revolution," pp. 1-21. See also Gene Wise, "From the 'Modell' to the Declaration: A Backward Reading in American Social Rhetorics," *Connections II*, 3 (Summer 1976), 12-26. For the importance of cultural form in studying historical communications, see Harry Stout's brilliant piece, "Culture, Structure, and the 'New' History," *Computers and the Humanities*, 9 (1975), 213-30.

46. For a lengthier discussion of this "strategic journey" idea, see Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1973), esp. Chap. 6, "Historical Criticism and the 'Strategic Journey,'" pp. 158-76.

47. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950).

48. I have described Faulkner's "perspectivistic" strategy in more detail in *American Historical Explanations*, pp. 3-56.

49. Robert Berkhofer, *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 319-20.

50. Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

51. John William Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," *American Quarterly*, 10 (Spring 1958), pp. 3-16.

52. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 47 ff.

53. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958). Weber's study was first published in German in 1904. See also R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1926).

54. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New

York: Macmillan, 1939), p. vii; *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953).

55. John Caughey, "Simulating the Past: A Method for Using Ethnosemantics in Historical Research," *American Quarterly*, 24 (December 1972), 625-42; Kelly, "Literature and the Historian."

56. For more on this "range of convenience" idea, and its uses in understanding the dynamic encounter between mind and world, "explanation" and "experience," see George Kelly, *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955).