

The Nature of American Studies and the problem of Methodology

FERHAT
Farhat *

Abstract

American Studies evolved through two major stages in the course of its development as a new discipline. From the 1920's through the 1950's, the intellectual quest to analyze American experience started with a comprehensive holistic (integrative) approach centred around the myth-symbol image school of thought. Culture and experience were seen restrictively in the manifestations of Great literature and high Art.

However, in the second stage beginning in the 1960's, critics of the movement, known as the counterculture movement, called for a definition of the discipline and its methodological tools. On the one hand, they insisted on the multidisciplinary character of the discipline to include subjects such as: Popular Culture, American minority Cultures.. etc., and related topics such as: ethnicity, race and gender...etc.,. As a consequence, they promoted the division and conflict approach to show the heuristic (autonomous) character of American experience. On the other hand, with regard to methodology, they emphasized that the element of culture in American Studies necessitates the recourse to social science methodologies.

Finally, in the 1970's, their efforts led to the establishment of the general discipline of American Culture Studies with a near-autonomous status for its faculties and departments, besides an expanding field of enquiry ranging from the humanities to the social sciences with respect to research methodologies.

Introduction

American Studies remains an ambiguous term especially for learners of English as a second language. The common understanding that one may have about the discipline is at best the assumption of a combination involving history and literature based on American national experience. While, this guess is partly true, it nevertheless falls short of a working definition. In particular, there is need to examine the shifting evolution between generations of Americanists and the further problem of locating the particular academic field where it belongs. Hence, this paper has a twofold aim. First, it seeks to determine the nature of American Studies. Secondly, it will examine

the problem of methodology as a growing concern for the field's practitioners and its impact on the discipline.

A quotation in the *American Quarterly* issue of August 1974 reads: « American Studies has thus emerged not as a discipline, but an arena for disciplinary encounter and staging ground for fresh topical pursuits. It embraces America in a Whitmanish (i.e.; hopeful) hug, excluding nothing and always beginning »¹. Until the mid-1960's when the concept of American Cultural Studies appeared as an offshoot of American Studies, the latter discipline went through three major phases of development in search for self-assertion.

Phase 1: The genesis of American Studies

It is generally believed² that seeds of American Studies can be traced to a book titled *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, by Vernon Louis Parrington³ that he published in 1927-1930. In the book, Parrington revived Emerson's view of the 'American Scholar' which calls for « the scholar's passionate application of the mind on the dynamic world without meditating forces ».⁴

Beginning with the founding stone of Parrington's book and following publications on American history until Alan Trachtenberg's book *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (In 1965), the new field of American Studies took form as to its loose structural contents and pedagogical ways to study it.

Early ripples in the 1930's began to enhance the attitude of dissatisfaction with old academic formalisms especially the compartmentalization of disciplines within the Humanities and social sciences in rigid structures that owed much to European and old World cultural hegemony. Their concern was how to study and teach about American experience⁵ in new ways. But it took till the 1950's for the new field to offer a meaningful subject and to set up its institutional framework. Thus, important figures came on the scene with valuable contributions that became sole canons for the new discipline. Among these celebrities, there were:

Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*. (1933)

The New England Mind : *The Seventeenth Century*. (1939)

Errand into the Wilderness (1956)

F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance : Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (1937)

Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy*. (1944)

Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. (1950)

Stanley T. Williams and Ralph H. Gabriel, *American Mind*. (1956)

R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the 19th Century*. (1955).

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*. (1961).

Miller in particular was matched to Parrington for sharing a compulsive drive in their obsession with the American experience. They wanted to impose form on experience in their attempt to discover the formation of the United States right at the beginning.⁶ They did not stop at the conventional academic desire to make a contribution to scholarly knowledge. Rather, they wanted the American past to answer questions they asked of it. Both pioneers aimed to break with scholarly conventions, namely, the age-old academic hierarchy and their implicit policing control over academia which blocked initiatives of independent and unusual scientific quest. In testimony to this new vision of the American past, Robert Spiller explained: « No one else experienced the drama just like a Parrington or a Miller. Others could only share the vision of a distinctive American culture and express discontent with how conventional disciplines have obfuscated that vision »⁷

Phase 2: Substance and content

By the 1950's, American scholars reached some consensus on the substance and nature of American experience and a methodological consensus on approaches to study that experience. This consensus became known as the 'Intellectual history synthesis' on the basis of inherent basic assumptions. These assumptions grew into boundaries for the new discipline of American Studies within which students were trained for the next generation.⁸ The assumptions are:

1- The new discipline's distinction lies in its location in the New World. Hence the concept of Americanness, uniqueness, (as opposed to Old World and Europeaness), hopefulness, innocence, individualistic, pragmatic, idealistic, Adam-Like (as opposed to the corrupt Old World).

2- The American past was usable for those in the movement of American Studies. The past was not just relevant to urgencies of the present, but it is also usable in suggesting methods to create order and direction for materials on the whole history of American experience.

3- The American mind exists as a single entity, complex and diversified.

4- The American mind can be found in anyone American (in theory), but mostly coherent in the country's leading thinkers (or Great Books). They were canons like Benjamin Franklin, James F. Cooper, H. Melville, M. Twain, John Dewey, H. Richard Niehbur; in short, the geniuses of high culture.

5- The American mind is form to national intellectual history with its features of puritanism, individualism, transcendentalism, Liberalism.. etc.,.

6- Great American Literature holds a privileged position in American Studies, scholarship and teaching.

These assumptions represented a **holistic** faith for Americanists. Thought in their view is an **integrated whole** and therefore interdisciplinary. As a consequence, American studies would bring together what the conventional academic disciplines had split apart.⁹

Phase 3: The Counterculture movement. From humanities to social sciences

In the mid-1960's, the intellectual history synthesis which has served American Studies so well was shattered. The movement was accused of being a bastion of reaction, not a refuge for free-thinking minds. It was seen as an elitist white protestant enterprise which tended to reinforce the dominant culture rather than critically analyze it. It was the beginning of disintegration for the movement and the rise of the counterculture movement and the troubled decade of the late 1960's.¹⁰

One American Studies scholar Robert Merideth from University of Miami became the spokesman of the counterculture movement. He was more critical of American culture than all his predecessors. Whereas critics like Parrington and Miller questioned the substance of American experience, Merideth rejected the whole structure en bloc; institutions and schools of thought. He explained his counterculture concept in a monograph titled: **Subverting Culture: The Radical as a Teacher** (1969). He also created a study course called 'culture Therapy 202' and followed it with activist structures and organizations.¹¹

The Culture Therapy Course criticized the corrupting genteel culture of American Studies. In total opposition to the Robert Spiller type of teacher or Thomas Cochrane and the like, Merideth advocated an adversary role against the existing culture for the teacher to save himself and his students from the culture's poison tentacles.¹² Furthermore, he set up counterculture organizations like the American Studies Association's Radical Caucus to speak against cultural elitism and exclusive cultural ethnocentrism.

The counterculture movement aimed to make place for the larger culture as opposed the elitist high culture. Merideth in particular hoped to divert Americanists from publishing scholarship such as characterized the American Studies elite in the 1950's. He rather intended to involve it in radical¹³ action, radical teaching and consciousness raising to reach the wider culture. As a consequence, academic research and discussion turned to new areas of American cultural experience. These included folklore Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, Culture Studies, Native American Studies, film Studies, Structuralism and American Studies....etc.;¹⁴

This fragmentation of American Studies came as a blow to the old intellectual history synthesis. **Division and conflict**, not **consensus**, seemed to characterize the culture. Suddenly, the holistic became heuristic timber of American experience. Now, students of American history put aside the concepts of myths and symbols to concentrate on actual material artifacts like buildings and ruins, social structures like the family, the city, labour unions, ghettos, etc.,. These details were valuable micro-representations of the real America and its internal mechanisms below the rationalized 'inflated' ideas that so far eclipsed them.¹⁵ This third phase in the life of American Studies

brought fragmentation to the discipline because of the vagueness of the concept of culture and the mystery that shrouded it until then for being lightly or grossly dismissed by the American Studies 'establishment' of the day.

American Studies, the concept of culture and methodology

By the late 1960's, the discipline went into a new stage of questioning and criticism. There was a shift from the view of American culture being holistic -integrated- in nature and expressed in the 'American mind' to a more discriminating view that sees culture on several levels and from different angles, not just the 'American mind' or the elevated minds. Now, Americanists were to use a variety of perspectives to analyze American experience which can be broken down into components such as popular culture, the culture of regionalism, the culture of literature...etc.,¹⁶

Early Americanists used a humanistic approach to study United States culture. They were represented by scholars like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. Their approach of the myth-symbol synthesis image to study American experience limits cultural standards to categories of culture bearers namely; great artists, historical thinkers and elevated minds who can extrapolate the culture's deepest meanings. This was not meant for the 'popular minds' or ordinary people who could not attain such level of understanding or interpretation of culture.¹⁷

With the counterculture movement, new approaches and dimensions were thrust on American Studies. As a matter of fact, there was a shift even in the location of the institutional centre of power concerning the discipline. Until the 1960's, the Northeast with its leading faculties of Harvard and Yale were the steering wheel of the movement. But now there were other rival universities, in the Middle West and Southwest in particular, winning momentum in redirecting the course of the movement. Pennsylvania, Iowa and California were in the vanguard of the counterculture movement. Thus, the urge to consider a social scientific sense of culture and culture studies developed with a wide institutional base from the beginning.

Two Pennsylvania faculty figures deserve attention for their pioneering contribution to the counterculture movement. Firstly, in 1972, Bruce Kucklick explained that the humanistic mode used by the symbol-myth image school had its shortcomings consisting of :

- Reading the whole American culture from inside literary texts only.
- Making generalizations through inflated intellectual abstractions in the form of 'isms'.
- Absence of empirical basis for these generalizations.¹⁸

Secondly, in 1974, the other Penn scholar Gordon Kelly proposed further social scientific patterns to analyze American experience. He came up with the functionalist role of culture. Kelly was concerned with the social and

function of literary texts. His concern was the social situation out of which both literature and culture are constructed. On the contrary, intellectual historians like Nash Smith and Leo Marx, valued the end-product above all else¹⁹. Hence, where the humanists (Smith, Marx and others) would start with works of great literature, Kelly went for general culture; ie; the larger culture, the wider culture and popular culture which is naturally the matrix of all work of art. As he put it:

"... We would do well to begin with a concept of context that directs attention to the rules and definitions which order and govern the creation and consumption of literature than begin with an ethnocentric (ie; WASP), commitment to a particular type of literary product."²⁰

Kelly's other major innovation was the perception of an institutional dimension to culture. To him, there are social structures mediating between the particular work of art and the wider culture. This institutional element was never recognized in previous myth-symbol explanations where scholars as in the case of Leo Marx tended to assume that the solitary individual creates or confronts the great works of literature directly without the mediation of social forms. For Kelly, a complex network of structures is interposed between the literature and the culture; involving among other factors the following:

- The institutional surroundings of the author.
- The publishing industry.
- Existing standards of criticism.
- The literary audience and its varied social composition.

All these intermediary situations need be considered when analyzing a cultural issue. Seen otherwise, Kelly offered American Studies a new set of questions and materials for scholarly inquiry.²¹

There is no denying the fact that with the fragmentation of American Studies and the rise of the counterculture movement, new approaches and disciplines ranging from the humanities to the social sciences were needed to cover the expanding area of academic inquiry. Thus, in the 1970's, Americanists turned to such disciplines as new ethnography, ethnohistory, ethnohistory and cognitive anthropology for appropriate methodologies to use in American culture studies. In other words, the crisis of American Studies and its fragmentation entailed regeneration and lease of life for the discipline in the second stage of its development beginning in the early 1970's.

Anthropology, Sociology and American Culture Studies

In the past, Americanists of the consensus school avoided borrowing from the social sciences although there were attempts to benefit from their methodologies. For example: David Potter is credited to have made one such

attempt in his book, **People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character** (1954). Other scholars particularly their spokesmen of the movement Smith and Marx warned as late as the late 1960's that recourse to the social sciences methods would result in the mutilation the image of man and culture.²² However, the holistic nature of the consensus school had no satisfactory answers to the social troubles of the 1960's America. Only the counterculture movement and the heuristic character of their conflict and division school seemed able to re-examine American experience for each component, social or cultural element, to be assessed in some degree of autonomy as self-representative

Anthropological influences

The merit of the new ethnography when used in American Culture Studies is that it has no pre-deterministic objectives. It has no special commitment to culture as written literature. Everyone becomes a culture bearer, not just a great thinker. At any rate, each of the new social science disciplines found passionate takers within the American Studies movement. For example: John Caughey and Jay Mechling, two leading figures of the counterculture movement recommended identification of Americanists with anthropological methods of research.²³ Similarly, Pennsylvania anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace who proposed cognitive anthropology methods for American Studies as early as 1962 saw his influence rise within the movement in the 1970's and his writings were widely used thereafter.²⁴

Nevertheless, these social scientific approaches had their share of criticisms, for some Americanists still doubted their usefulness. For example : Richard Beeman of Pennsylvania History Department argued in an **American Quarterly** article in the fall issue of 1977 that new ethnography can only give rigid and static explanations of cultural issues. Its methods of componential analysis of itemizing a culture's codes can only disrupt the continuum within a culture's elements.²⁵

Sociological influences

Like new ethnography and cognitive anthropology, sociology offered another social scientific approach. One single book titled **The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge** by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman was responsible for the Sociology connection with American Studies. Like the new ethnographers, Berger and Luckmann approached culture cognitively seeking to uncover the underlying codes. But Berger and Luckmann do not limit themselves to looking at the culture's codes. They also try to see how they get constructed. So, their focus is institutional and the free, not predetermined, focus on cultural subjects and their components should help bring much heuristic (autonomous)

manoeuvrability within American Studies. This is useful especially as a teaching strategy because on the one hand it helps to determine the particular social realities and on the other hand it unveils the historical choices that led Americans to construct them in their particular ways.²⁶

The last development in American Studies is the reflexive trend, i.e; self-examination or self-criticism. It came after the previous major turning points of the 1960's, namely: firstly, the new anthropological and sociological definitions of American Studies; Secondly, the emphasis on the role of social structures in intellectual and artistic expressions. Now came another sense of awareness to crown it all. It mushroomed in a booklength critique in 1973 titled **The Search for a Method in American Studies** by Cecil Tate.²⁷ One earlier sign to that effect was Henry Nash Smith's admission of his naivety and dismissal of the question of self-consciousness within the movement until the counterculture movement.²⁸

The Reflexive Trend: Departments and Programmes

It was Jay Mechling of the University of Carolina who first wrote about the reflexive trend by using the term "social generations in American Studies." In 1977, he wrote that the movement was in its third generation of practitioners. Where one of the earlier generations had tended to align with one or the other established disciplines notably literature or history, many in the third generation were living academically for American Studies. Previous scholars preferred other departments notably English to follow their careers where methodology

was no problem. Now Americanists remained in American Studies and tended to be more self-critical than in the past.²⁹

The third generation as a matter of fact was also more socialized in methodology because of the turbulent 1960's, i.e; more predisposed towards to social science methodologies. The new scholarship expressed in the 1970's new trends represented by firstly, the new ethnography, secondly Kelly's social contextualism and the creation of new American Studies Departments. For instance, in 1973, there were 32 departments nationwide whereas in 1958 there were about less than half that number.³⁰

But Mechling's contribution was not only his creative mind but also his organizational skills. In 1969, the programmes of American Studies at Davis, California was established thanks to the collaboration of Mechling, Robert Merideth and David Wilson of the English Department at Davis, CA. The trio published a new kind of programme in the field in 1973 in an essay titled "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum". It became one of the most influential articles in the movement like Nash Smith's of 1957 where he stood against a method for American Studies.³¹ Where Smith waited for consensus on methodology, the Davis group simply repeated

Mechling's earlier recommendation to identify with American Culture Studies and Social science methodology. They insisted on the mode of approach -ie; methodology-not the body of material to distinguish the discipline.³²

Concerning his organizational prowess, Mechling's worth shone through his role as Chairman of the American Studies Association's Standing Committee on Bibliographical Needs and Policies. (Now the Bibliography Subcommittee).

The Bibliography Subcommittee has been responsible for the annual bibliographical issue of the **American Quarterly** since 1974. In its issues, the Subcommittee wrote on the methodology of American Studies: endorsing such approaches as social science methods, and content analysis methods, structuralism and above-ground archeology, ..etc; ³³. It also dealt with institutional arrangements on behalf of American Studies. The agreements involved historical and arts museums, Native American Missions, ethnic and national movements..etc.,.

The Subcommittee has also stimulated widespread discussion about the movement and its orientation. It frequently commissions articles and open forums at National Conventions of the American Studies Association. Moreover, it created new publications to widen the dialogue within the movement. Thus, the yearly **journal prospects** was founded in 1975. Special issues were included in the **American Quarterly** for hot topics, themes and periods. Similarly, numerous reading seminars and summer institutes were organized to sharpen reflexiveness within the movement. Now some of the richest works in the history of the movement can be found in its periodicals such as: **Journal of Popular Culture**, **Journal of American Studies**, **American Studies International**,...etc.,.³⁴

Conclusion

As we review the history of the movement, one can notice that from the 1970's, focus has been put increasingly on culture studies. As in American Studies in earlier decades, there is a growing tendency towards specialization with the further fragmentation of even American Culture Studies. While this evolution weakens further the old synthesis approach of American Studies, it still has the merit of putting the movement on the offensive to bring to life apparently dispensable aspects of American experience so far. For in American Culture Studies, every little detail of that experience becomes indispensable, including the recourse to social science methodologies. Nevertheless, the overall balance sheet shows constant gains for the movement past and present in intellectual and institutional terms. Firstly, there has been a continuous revolt against formalism. Secondly, the achievement of a gradual release from the control of conventional disciplines. Thirdly, the offer of fresh course programmes,

study courses and curricula for the movement. Fourthly, and most importantly, the experimentation with social science methodologies, though selectively and experimentally.

Endnotes

- 1). Stanley Bailis, "The Social Sciences in American Studies: An integrative Conception", *American Quarterly*, (Baltimore: Md), N° 2 (August 1974), 350-54.
- 2). Howard Mumford Jones, *The Theory of American Literature*, 2nd ed. (1948; rpt. Cornell : Methuen, 1956) pp.139-43.
- 3). See biographical details on Parrington in Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington*, (N.Y: Knopf, 1968) pp. 349 ff. Remember it is a recurring topic in all the publications of the American Studies Association.
- 4). Morton White, *Social thought in America: The revolt Against Formalism*, 2nd ed (Boston : Beacon Press, 1949) p.127. See also U.S.I.A , *Highlights of American Literature*, n.ed. (n.d. (Wash, D.C., n.p., 1995), ch. VIII .
- 5). Perry Miller , *Errand into the Wilderness*, 2nd ed. (1956, rpt, N.Y: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 35-36.
- 6). *Ibid*, 55.
- 7). Robert Spiller, "Unity and Diversity in the Study of American Culture: The American Studies Association in perspective", *American Quarterly*, 25 N° 4, (December 1973) 612. Hereafter AQ .
- 8). On Yale's programmes see for example Sydney Ahlstrom, "Studying America and American Studies at Yale", *American Quarterly*, 22, (Summer 1970) 503-17.
- 9). Cecil Tate, *The Search for a Method in American Studies*, (Minnesota: Scribner's Sons, 1973), pp.105-26.
- 10). William O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's*, (Boston: University Press of New England, 1971) pp. 88-93.
- 11). Robert Merideth, "Subverting Culture: The Radical As a Teacher", (New University Conference, n.p. (Fla.), 1969), 1-3.
- 12). *Ibid*, 12.
- 13). R.Spiller, "Value and Method..." in H.M. Jones, *Ibid*, p.7
- 13). Robert Sklar, " American Studies and the Realities of America" AQ, 22, Summer 1970), 597-605. See also Doris Friedensohn, *American Studies 242: Education and social Change*, (n.p., Kirkland College Press, 1972) ch. 2.
- 14). Christopher Lash, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom" in Barton Bernstein, ed. *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, (N.Y: Random House, 1969), p.223 ff.
- 15). See also details on interaction of Culture Studies and American Studies in Robert Sklar, "The Problem of American Studies" *Philosophy: A Bibliography of New Directions*, AQ, 27 (Summer 1975) pp.245-62.
- 16). *Ibid*.
- 17). Cf. the six assumptions of American Studies detailed *supra* p.2.
- 18). Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies", AQ, 24, N°3 (Fall 1972) 435-50
- 19). Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian", AQ, 26, N° 2 (May 1974) pp.80-89
- 20). *Ibid*. 147.

21. For details on his contribution see pp. 149-55.
- 22). Henry N.Smith, "Can American Studies Develop a Method" in Hennig Cohen, ed., *Approaches to the Study of the United States*, (Hyderabad: American Studies Research Center, 1988) pp.338-349. See also in monograph.
- 23)-J.Caughey, "Stimulating the Past: A Method for Using Ethnosemantics in Historical Research", *AQ*, 24 N°4 (December 1972) 626-34. See also Jay Mechling, "In search of an American Ethnophysics" in Luther Luedtke, ed., *The Study of American Culture: Contemporary Conflicts*", (Berkeley: California O.P., 1977) pp.242-45
- 24).Anthony F.C.Wallace, *Culture and Personality*, 2nd ed. (1961, N.Y: Random House, 1970) pp.225-236. Booklet.
- 25). Richard Beeman, "The New Social History and the Search for Community in Colonial America", *AQ*, 29, N°3, (Fall 1977) 42-43
- 26)-J.Mechling, and M.Williams, "Teaching Up", *AQ*, 25, N°1 (Spring 1975) pp.15-19
- 27- Cecil Tate, pp. 517-47.
- 28)- H.N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 2nd ed., (1950, Mass: Harvard, 1970), pp.preface.
- 29)- J.Mechling, 'Ethnophysics' pp. 242-45. See also history of trend in robert Walker, *American Studies in the United States: A Survey of College Programmes*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University press, 1958) pp. 158-62. see also Spiller, "American Studies, Past, Present and Future" in Joseph kwiat and Mary Turpie eds., *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images*, (Minnesota: Collins Press Ltd), 1960) pp.207-22
- 30)-Walker, *Ibid*. 166 ff.
- 31)- Smith, "Can American ..." pp. 350-53. See: *AQ*, 9, 4 (Winter 1957) 206ff.
- 32)- Tate, op. cit 517-47. See also pershing Vartanian, "The Voluntary American Studies Program: Strategies for Development", *AQ*, ³⁰ (Bibliography 1978) 410-22
- 33)-A comprehensive review of the development of American Culture Studies is in the *AQ* Bibliographical issues of the years 1975-77.
- 34)- On cross-cultural applications of American Culture Studies, see for example: Daniel Walker Howe, "American victorianism as culture", *AQ*, 27, N°4 (December 1975) 507-32. See also Ray Brown, Sam Grogg and Larry Landrum, eds., "Theories and Methodologies in Popular culture", *AQ*, 27, N°1 (spring 1975) 480-503