

# American Studies and Americans: A Crank's Critique

*Response to Horwitz and Friedensohn*

**Steven Watts**

On this fine spring afternoon we meet here in the home of the St. Louis Cardinals, those legendary monuments of midwestern culture, to ponder some serious issues in the evolution of American Studies. This is not a far-fetched connection, I might note parenthetically, because in baseball, as in academe, the old-fashioned organic, "essentialist" notion of a team has given way to a "constructionist" model. Now frantic forays into the free-agent market in search of an RBI hitter, or for the critical theory of the month, have become the only way to stay competitive. At any rate, we have just heard the first pair of plenary presentations devoted to a look at the state of American Studies at the end of the twentieth century. The organizers of the conference kindly have asked me to comment.

I suspect ulterior motives. My past "interventions" in this field, to use the fashionably highfalutin word, have not been free of controversy and, on at least one occasion, not free from the threat of physical mayhem. As a matter of fact, my comments on American Studies usually summon up images of the idiot relative who is occasionally unlocked from the garret, led downstairs and allowed to rant and rave and embarrass everyone for a bit, and then politely shoved back behind lock and key. Moreover, I seem to be at an awkward stage of my career—too young to be a curmudgeon (although friends assure me of progress on this front) and too old to be a young Turk. So I must rest content with being a "crank," which my dictionary defines as "someone attracted to whimsical or unusual turns of speech and thought; a person given to strange actions, ideas, and manners." So mustering my own brand of cranky populism, I'll try my best to play the part assigned me and not to disappoint.

The first part of my remarks likely will be unremarkable. Both Professor Friedensohn and Professor Horowitz have offered us thoughtful, provocative essays on the evolving status of American Studies in the 1990s, albeit from rather different perspectives. And I believe that we learned something from each. Friedensohn has looked at the internationalization of American Studies and the attendant difficulties of cultural imperialism. She calls for the nourishing of a comparative, "transnational" American Studies which poses American experiences as a kind of sounding board for gauging issues and developments in other, non-American cultures yet refrains from setting up the United States, in patronizing and power-mongering fashion, as an absolute standard. While I think it is safe to conclude that Friedensohn's political sensibility is rather different from mine, overall I find little to quarrel with in her presentation. Her comments strike me as being both sensitive and sensible. Horowitz has approached the evolution of American Studies from a different direction, looking at the institutionalization of the field. He argues, with admirable passion and humor, for a tighter, more disciplinary definition of American Studies and offers some cogent observations about certain dangers lurking in the current attraction to culture studies. Once again, I find little to disagree with here. I find *any* attempt to define American Studies salutary, especially one which seeks coherence without rigidity and demonstrates a generous scholarly spirit without endorsing some form of chaos theory. And I find much to like in these presentations because they have a practical bent, focusing on real problems and situations which confront working American Studies scholars.

But my major complaint about the papers is a larger one, and one that reflects my own biases, undoubtedly, and my current sense of frustration with American Studies. Both essays, it seems to me, while they are certainly situated in a social context, end up pointing inward toward academic concerns and issues, something which restricts our larger vision of the field. I realize, of course, that in one sense this comment is enormously unfair. This is a professional conference full of academics, and the plenary speakers have been asked to address a topic that is by definition largely academic. So I apologize in advance for any unreasonableness along these lines. On the other hand, however, this problem reflects what I see as a more pressing concern at the heart of American Studies these days—its evident and growing incongruity with regard to the experiences and values of Americans, especially those benighted few who somehow manage to reside outside of college campuses.

All of which leads to the second, larger section of my remarks, which likely will be, if not remarkable, at least remarked upon. I would like to range a little further afield to take up the broader issue of the conference, "From Culture Concept to Culture Studies," and address the state of American Studies from my own iconoclastic perspective. I trust my fellow panelists will allow me some latitude here: Professor Friedensohn, because she seems like a decent, tolerant person interested in debate and dialogue, and Professor Horowitz, because his last major intellectual statement before MAASA focused on the unexpected

delights and significance of pig excrement. This leads me to believe that he understands latitude.

My thesis is a simple one, admittedly exaggerated for the sake of clarity. American Studies, in my opinion, has become largely irrelevant to the great mass of Americans. Socially inbred, pedagogically indecipherable, politically marginalized, intellectually self-indulgent, and impossibly elitist, mainstream American Studies has lost touch with the very culture it purports to explain. As a result, I would argue, it musters little influence beyond the seminar room or the convention hotel as even educated, reading Americans do not take it seriously enough to dislike it. It has become, like many other fields in the humanities these days, a kind of academic sideshow providing intellectual stimulation and therapeutic sustenance for its practitioners, but eliciting quizzical looks, raised eyebrows, and occasional satire from just about everyone else. Many academics find this an inevitable, indeed a healthy situation given what they see as the sorry state of America and their natural predilection for forming an adversary culture. But I do not, and I'm about to tell you why. Exploring all the dimensions of this problem would overmatch my limited abilities and, more importantly, encourage homicidal fantasies in the audience (there will probably be enough of those already). So I will focus on the two themes which seem most crucial to fostering my own sense of uneasiness.

First, theory. The broad umbrella topic of this conference, "From the Culture Concept to Culture Studies," as I understand it, refers to the broad evolution of the field over the last three decades. At the risk of oversimplification, this process has involved two primary trends. First, Americanist scholarship has rejected the idea of an American culture, and substituted for it a mosaic of pluralistic "cultures," which seem to be subdividing ever more rapidly as the years go by. Second, in parallel fashion, many if not most Americanists have entered into studying culture as a set of "constructions" (primarily of race and gender, less importantly of class and ethnicity) which demand deconstruction. The language of decentering, shifting location, and revising narratives has become familiar to all of us. Moreover, near the heart of this approach lay a conviction that "reality" exists only by way of a vast variety of cultural expressions which must be examined as "texts." This multicultural, construction-and-text school simply has taken over American Studies during the last generation. The great majority of books in the field now trot out a familiar conga line of theorists and critics—post-structuralists, the Birmingham school, Lacanians, many others—who line up one behind the other and go snaking through the literature shimmying and shaking to the rhythm of academic revolution.

Second, politics. To put it bluntly, American Studies has been captured by the left over the last generation of scholarly work. More particularly, it has been colonized by a certain sliver of the left encased in academe—the cultural left, or what I like to call the "linguistic left." This is neither the old working class radicalism of the labor union movement or the New Deal, nor the Marxist remnant of the Popular Front or the American Communist Party. Instead, politically, the

linguistic left is the spawn of the various liberationist movements of the 1960s who have fled to college campuses and holed up from Cambridge and New Haven to Berkeley and Santa Cruz (and perhaps a couple of spots in between out here in the cultural boondocks). This academic leftism has taken root in an bourgeois academic world and directed its energies toward wrestling with the vexed questions of identity politics.

These theoretical and political developments have nourished vitality *within* American Studies and brought certain advances in the field. I need not recite them, because nearly every ASA convention these days resonates with the sounds of uplifted voices joined together in a loud chorus of self-congratulation. But *outside* the field of American Studies, in terms of scholarly connection with the great mass of Americans out there, the picture is not quite as pretty. In fact, it is rather grim. Enormous problems have slowly evolved as notable for their size as for the fact that they are conspicuously ignored. Once again, because of limitations of time and your patience, I can list them only superficially.

There exists, for example, the familiar problem of indecipherable writing and speaking in the present fashion of American Studies which usually reduces non-specialists to a state of blank-eyed befuddlement or head-banging frustration. There also is the more serious problem of the field's resolute distancing of itself from "reality," which, indeed, is a word that cannot even be mentioned in the field anymore without using quotation marks. Theory-driven research and political agendas often have produced a blissful lack of attention to real human beings and the real lives they lead. Too often this has resulted in fanciful readings of the American experience which usually manage to tell academics what they want to hear.

But the most troubling issue undermining modern American Studies, in my view, is the political marginalization which we have imposed upon ourselves. As should be evident to anyone with an intellectual pulse, work in the humanities and social sciences is political from the word go. So you will not hear from me any indignant calls for objective, non-politicized research and teaching. But what you *will* hear is an appeal for *true* political diversity and *genuine* debate among political viewpoints, something which is sadly lacking at present in the field of American Studies. Instead of genuine engagement with a variety of ideological positions, all which are granted a respectful if critical hearing, we find narrow political formulations, exchanges which invoke the atmosphere of the support group rather than the debating society, and a kind of political back-patting that continually reinforces the hegemony of leftist identity politics in the field.

Now my complaint is not that the left has won, but that there has not even been a contest. Instead of real dialogue and an exchange of different ideas, we witness a political juggernaut which establishes pre-ordained consensus and encourages contempt for those who disagree. As Wilcomb Washburne, a former President of the organization, complained in a public letter in a recent ASA Newsletter, contemporary American Studies demonstrates little concern for "political and intellectual diversity." It hosts a politically circumscribed discussion where the

trenchant criticism offered by intellectuals such as Russell Jacoby, the late Christopher Lasch, Christina Hoff Summers, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Shelby Steele (and others who shall remain nameless) seldom finds a niche. They are dismissed with a roll of the eyes, or more often, simply ignored.

This situation, which is merely annoying within the confines of Americanist scholarship, turns deadly when viewed in context of the larger political culture of the United States. In case no one has noticed, since at least 1980, and more probably since 1968, the great bulk of Americans have rejected just about everything the left has proposed and moved steadily to the right. Scholars in American Studies, with few exceptions, have remained pristinely, serenely oblivious to such mundane concerns. Even more astonishingly, they have stood absolutely mute regarding the two most astounding developments of our own time—the series of gigantic revolutions which caused international communism to collapse into ruin, and the galloping growth of an international corporate order and consumer ethic which many people around the world seem to be embracing. These (literally) earth-shaking events have had little influence on the ideological shape of American Studies for a simple reason—these are not texts, they are old-fashioned facts, and they suggest conclusions which the conventional wisdom of the leftist establishment does not wish to hear. Instead, with index fingers stuck firmly in their ears, most Americanists loudly hum liberationist anthems to drown out the interference. Thus the politics of American Studies increasingly has a hollow ring, which results from a lot of words floating around in a very confined space where nothing, and no one, seems to be absorbing them.

I submit one brief piece of evidence of how mainstream Americanists have alienated themselves, both politically and theoretically, from the culture they purport to interpret. The National History Standards, which came out of UCLA a couple of years ago, encapsulated (and actually sanitized) the most advanced thinking among scholars of the American experience. After their submission, as most of you probably know, an uproar ensued. Some of it consisted of the predictable bellowing from sharp-eyed, overfed, professional agitators such as Rush Limbaugh (for an antidote, see Al Franken's hilarious book, *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations*). But lost amid the din was a more significant act—the United States Senate condemned the new standards by a vote of 99-1. This, I would suggest, has been a little recognized and unprecedented achievement in the history of modern American politics. A body of elected representatives which theretofore had divided sharply over burning the American flag, or balancing the federal budget, or reducing the national military arsenal could summon a 99% majority to denounce scholarship in American Studies. Edward Kennedy and Strom Thurmond could link arms, Carol Mosely-Braun and Jesse Helms (last seen slap-fighting and exchanging racial slurs in a Capitol elevator) could be brought together only by one thing—a common disgust with contemporary scholarship in the study of American culture and society. But was this seen as a hint that something may be just a bit askew in the field? Did it trigger a round of serious introspection? Of course not. Instead, it prompted an orgy of

whining at an ASA session in Pittsburgh entitled “The Assault on the Academy” where hand-wringing Americanists exchanged paranoid fantasies, never once stopping to consider that critics of the standards may have had a respectable, legitimate position and that architects of the standards may have missed the boat.

Speaking as a simple country boy, perhaps I can best articulate my own vision of American Studies, and what it should be doing politically, with a brief story. I tend to like stories. It also concerns something which took place at the ASA convention in Pittsburgh—not at any of the regular sessions, but rather on a Saturday evening with a special presentation by the Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. Predictably, barely a half-dozen university academics were in attendance among an audience of about one-hundred. But those of us lucky enough to be there heard an extraordinary performance of instrumental and vocal music ranging from orchestral pieces to spirituals and even to a patriotic tune. What struck me most, however, in addition to the incredible talent and skills of these boys and girls, was the nature of the group in that large room. It was racially mixed, with the choral director being black and the orchestral director white, and the performers likewise coming from several racial and ethnic groups. The listeners, most of them family members, were not only racially diverse, but economically diverse as well with well-heeled men and women sitting next to obviously working-class people. The wonderful music which poured out from those kids created some striking vignettes—a tiny, young black girl sitting in the first violin chair playing like a fiend on European classical music; a gawking, oversized white boy singing his lungs out on a lovely Negro spiritual; the elderly black choral director joking with considerable pride that one of his “daughters,” a white female cellist, had just won a scholarship to a prestigious university; and the obvious pride in achievement radiating from those parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters as they strained forward and applauded until their hands hurt. Racial and gender and class healing, not separatism and division—idealism and the fruits of hard work, not resentment and carping—colored the atmosphere. It was deeply moving. This is what the great mass of Americans seems to yearn for, and to me, at least, it suggests where American Studies should be going. Instead of pridefully, one might say bull-headedly, positioning itself as an adversary culture to which few pay serious attention, American Studies might do better to try and understand the emotions and ideas and values of ordinary Americans like the ones who crowded into that Pittsburgh hotel room with such strong feelings and evident desires.

This cranky populist critique is, of course, a deliberate attempt to undermine complacency. And in that spirit, I offer one final word of (probably unwanted) advice. It would be a big mistake to write off criticism such as this, as the academic left tends to do whenever it hears a challenge, as merely the fuming of a Pat Robinson or Lynne Cheney or Newt Gingrich or some other right-wing blowhard. It would also be a mistake, as leftist academics tend to do, to fall back upon the latest genteel fashion of racist, sexist stereotyping by haughtily dismissing such criticism with the sneering label, “white male.” Continuing to insist that

the *only* available alternatives to the academic left is the reactionary right may offer comfort, but it is of a rather flimsy and self-delusional sort. Moreover, it narrows things down to a dangerous set of choices, one that academics should *not* force the American people to make.

Instead, I urge you to see my remarks for what they are—a critique that emerges squarely from the center of public life where people work hard, play by the rules, and want American ideals fulfilled, not destroyed. Such sentiments are common currency among citizens who are not automatically racist because they question certain kinds of affirmative action in the name of equity; who are not simply sexist because they step back from the more extreme claims of radical feminism; who are not by definition reactionary because they believe in family values and want a good life for their children; who are not the stupid dupes of (nor heroic resisters to) capitalism or patriarchy or the culture industry. Ordinary citizens in the great American mainstream struggle with the modern world and, not surprisingly, they are complex, frequently ambivalent, and flawed. They tend to be progressive in their commitment to democracy and equal opportunity, and conservative in terms of their reverence for American traditions of achievement and striving, their yearning for legitimate authority and social cohesion which goes beyond the paltry confines of the self, and their desire for stability and community. We should occasionally listen to them.

Thus it might be salutary to reconsider the papers of Professors Friedensohn and Horowitz, and the other plenary presentations you hear at this MAASA conference, in light of their relationship to the great political and cultural mainstream of modern America. There you will find desires for cultural integration, social cohesion, legal equity, and the *realization*, rather than the obliteration, of American ideals. It is an impulse perhaps best captured by the magnificent language of one of my heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., who, although fully cognizant of all the problems and limitations of this formulation, nonetheless defined the civil rights movement in terms of “standing up for what is best in the American dream.” This is the backbone of America, but it is one which few American Studies scholars ever seem to locate these days as they frantically dissect the body politic into its constituent limbs. In this uneasy age where millions of ordinary citizens are assaulted by corporate downsizing and growing economic disparities, by declining opportunity and moral confusion, by frightening divisions along the fault lines of race, class, and gender, the best American Studies seems to come up with are fanciful visions of cultural revolution, empty promises of individual empowerment, and illusory, therapeutic gratifications of identity politics. Is it any wonder that few Americans off campus ever listen to us? Obsessed with working the margins and deconstructing everything in sight, few of us can even *see* the center anymore let alone understand it or reconstruct connection to it. And that is no way to run, or to study, a culture.