

Murray G. Murphey and the Philosophical Foundations of American Studies

Murphey Symposium

Introduction

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More than any other single individual, Murray G. Murphey has for the past forty years been identified with and epitomized the Department of American Civilization at The University of Pennsylvania and its quest to comprehend American civilization holistically and to approach its study as a coherent discipline. In 1954, after having received his doctorate in American Civilization from Yale, Murray arrived in Philadelphia for a two year stint as a Rockefeller Fellow. Two years later he received a faculty appointment in American Civilization, and in 1966 he was promoted to Full Professor. For nearly twenty years he served as Chair of the department, during which time it was consistently recognized as among the outstanding graduate programs in American Civilization/Studies in the country.

During his tenure at Penn, Murray has had an extraordinary influence on a wide range of students—undergraduates and graduates alike. Quite simply, he is the most brilliant person and among the most charismatic scholar/teachers I've ever met. As the comments of members of this symposium attest, virtually everyone who's ever worked with him shares these sentiments. Though Murray established himself as a leading historian of American philosophy—in 1992 he was the recipient of the Herbert W. Schneider Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Understanding and Development of American Philosophy by the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy—it was his exploration of

the philosophy of history, his probing of how we understand the past and past cultures, that has inspired and challenged his students and represents his most enduring legacy to the field of American studies. This project of philosophical inquiry into the process of reconstructing the past is reflected in both his *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (1974) and *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, which is the subject of this symposium.

The idea for the symposium was hatched at the 1994 American Studies Association annual meeting in Nashville. Stan Bailis and I bumped into each other as we waited to be seated for breakfast at the convention hotel. As graduates of the University of Pennsylvania Department of American Civilization, our conversation inevitably drifted to the tragedy of the recent dissolution of the Penn program, with which until then we had, I believe justifiably, been proud to have been associated.

Stan and I began discussing ways in which we might register a collective protest about the demise of the Penn program when Doris Friedensohn, Jay Mechling, and Mike Zuckerman walked in, and we joined them and the conversation continued. Doris was typically warm and supportive as the crew of Penn alums vented their spleen and discussed a variety of ways to express to Murray and to the broader academic community the immense respect and affection that we—and countless others who have been influenced by him over the course of the last four decades—have for him. We left that conversation agreeing that among the ways in which we might recognize, celebrate, and pay tribute to the tremendous impact that Murray has had on scores of students and on the study of American civilization would be a symposium on Murray's *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, which had then only recently been published.

That fall Stan and Jay organized a session—billed as a “conversation”—examining the nature and implications of Murray's work that took place at the 1995 ASA meetings in Pittsburgh. I quote from the conference program:

The conference topic [“Toward a Common Ground”], like so many of our field's on-going dilemmas, invites a basic question: Can members of different cultures understand and explain each other correctly? Using recent work in several disciplines [Murray] Murphey has mounted an attack on currently favored approaches to this question—relativism, pluralism, narrativism—and on some of the positivistic views that these approaches reject. That result, . . . an original, challenging, and oddly hopeful basis for understanding what our common grounds have ever been and may yet be. . . , is the object of our conversation.

The papers presented in that session form the basis for this symposium in *American Studies*. In inviting the participants to revise their conference papers

for publication, I wrote, “Obviously we’d like the symposium to be a serious intellectual engagement of *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*. On the other hand, unlike most review symposia in which personal commentary on or reflections about the individual whose work is being reviewed is shunned, I think it’s most appropriate for you to retain your personal reflections on the impact that Murray, the scholar and the person, has had on you.” Although Murray was present at the Pittsburgh ASA session, he simply was an audience member and responded to the criticisms directed at him only with his distinctive impish grin. Here, with his inimitable stylistic clarity, he has accepted our invitation for him to respond more fully.