American Civilization As A Discipline?

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In 1967 I wrote an article that was published in the *Emory University Quarterly* under the title "American Civilization as a Discipline." That claim of disciplinary status for American civilization has been challenged enough times in the ensuing years to make it worth while raising anew the question, is American civilization an academic discipline? That depends on what American civilization is, and on what a discipline is. Let us take these in order. The academic task of American civilization is the study of American culture, past and present. The goal is to explain why the members of American society do what they do, and to understand better the nature of culture in general. These are rather different objectives and involve different issues, so that each requires comment.

"Culture" is the most important explanatory concept that anthropology has so far contributed to social science. The action of human beings is only partially determined by our biology. If our biology requires that we all eat, sleep, and copulate, it does not determine precisely what or when or how we eat, or where or when we sleep, or with whom or under what conditions we have sex. It is to anthropology that we owe the discovery of the remarkable range of variation of human action from one society to another, and the equally important discovery that within any given society there are established, approved ways of action that are characteristic of that society. It is the culture—that is, those learned, established, approved ways of thought and action—that, in conjunction with our biological imperatives, render human action intelligible and explicable.

Anthropologists have found it difficult to settle on a precise definition of culture because the concept covers so much. Some regard cultures as ideational systems, whether cognitive, structural, or symbolic.[1] Others take a materialistic

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approach.[2] But whatever the specific definition, all agree that culture is learned, shared (at least to some degree), symbolically mediated, and characteristic of particular societies or populations. So understood, culture includes at least the world view (the way members of the society conceptualize their environment and themselves), the goals, values, and desires that motivate action, the rules that govern action, the sanctions that reward conformity to cultural expectations and punish deviance, and the material apparatus employed in action—i.e., the material objects made or used by the society. This combination of elements does suffice to explain (even in a rigorous sense) much of what members of the society do, when and where they do it, and why.[3] It is the addition of culture to biology that makes human action comprehensible.

Although there is debate among anthropologists on the issue, I want to insist that culture is a real characteristic of societies. Real people in those societies do follow real rules (i.e., rules that are real to them) for real reasons (reasons they believe). If they did not, then such rules, values, motives, etc. could not be used to explain their behavior. One does not need to hold that the entities believed in by members of a society are real—that Kali and Yahweh and Zeus are real entities—but one does need to accept the fact that people in those societies believe those entities to be real. The culture is real, in the sense that the members of the society really believe it and act on it, whether the entities whose existence it posits are real or not.

What the student of culture does is to develop a theory about or model of the culture of the society in question. This theory will never account for everything that goes on in that society. Not all action conforms to the cultural rules; sometimes people's performance of their roles fails to meet the cultural standard, some action is idiosyncratic, and some is deviant. Human action is extraordinarily variable and no theory can account for every variation. But human action is also remarkably uniform—far more so than we usually think. If it were not, one would not dare to drive a car. The most that a model of a given culture can hope to do is to account for the central tendencies of that culture and a wide range of the obtainable data. If it can do that, it has rendered most of the action of the members of the society explicable.

How is such a theory to be constructed? Anthropologists have emphasized participant observation in the field as the defining feature of their method. One must go to live in the society in question; ideally, one must master the native language so that one can interview as well as observe the natives in their daily round of activities. Over the course of one's extended stay in the field, one records and analyzes the data and gradually acquires an understanding of the native culture such that one can act as the natives do. Although the anthropologist does not "go native" and adopt the native culture as his/her own, yet the understanding acquired must be deep enough to enable him/her to understand their world.

Such methods were originally developed for the study of small non-literate societies. In such cases, the investigator could literally interview everyone, check and recheck interpretations against all relevant members of the group, and hopefully obtain a reasonably full understanding of the total culture. More recently, anthropologists have applied their tools to larger and more complex societies where this sort of comprehensive survey of the entire population is impossible. Some have met this problem by focusing on small subgroups where traditional techniques are applicable and have then been faced with problems about generalization. Others have utilized techniques of sampling to define subsets of the society for study and based generalizations on statistical inference. In both cases, there has been a host of methodological problems that have received detailed study, and that—despite the qualms of so-called post-modernists—appear to be tractable.

When one turns to the study of past societies, however, the problems become far more severe. Participant observation of a past society is not possible. In the case of societies in the recent past, attempts are often made to remedy this by the use of oral histories, but oral history has its own problems—respondents do not form random samples from past populations, their memories are influenced by events that have happened since the time in question, they often misremember, or do not remember at all, or lie. As has been noted many times, if all the people who claimed in the 1970s that they voted for John Kennedy in 1960 had actually voted for him, he would have had the greatest electoral landslide in history instead of barely winning a very close election. But in the general case, the past society we study is one for which there are no living survivors, so that observation, questionnaires, and interviews are out of the question. How can we study the culture of a past society under these conditions?

Probably the most common approach has been to take a model or theory that has been developed on the basis of current data and apply it to the understanding of the past. This practice is so common that it often passes without remark. Thus, for example, the theory of reference groups was developed by Stouffer et al. in the *American Soldier*[4] to account for the differential attitudes of draftees toward the draft. Merton further elaborated the theory, adding the notion of negative reference groups.[5] When Benson published *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*[6] in 1961, he used this theory to explain voting behavior in New York state during the Jacksonian period, and took its applicability for granted. But applying contemporary theories to past societies raises problems; how do we know that a theory confirmed on data from our own time is applicable to a society in a past era?

A good example of this problem is offered by the attempt to apply the core voter-independent voter model of electoral behavior to the behavior of voters in past elections. The model itself depends critically upon the variable, party identification. Values of that variable are determined by interviews with voters in which they are asked about their political party, and are scored on a seven-point scale of Strong Republican, Weak Republican, Republican Inclined Independent, Independent, Democratically Inclined Independent, Weak Democrat, and Strong

Democrat. What the scale measures is the degree to which voters identify with a political party, where "identify" is understood as a psychological phenomenon. The theory holds that the stronger the psychological identification of a voter with a political party, the greater the probability that the voter votes for the candidates of that party; for independents, the model that best predicts their behavior is that they vote at random, so that they are equally likely to vote for either party. But party identification is held to be much more stable than actual voting behavior. Voters may well vote for a candidate of an opposing party, even though they have not changed their party identification, under the influence of short-term factors specific to one or two elections. Thus the model holds that voting behavior is determined by two different influences—party identification, which is a long-term enduring preference for a particular political party, and short-term factors such as the charisma of a particular candidate, a scandal in an administration, failure of a specific policy, etc. This theory has been successfully applied to the explanation of voting behavior from 1952 on.[7]

But can it be applied to earlier elections—for example, those of the 1880s? Obviously, it is not possible to interview the dead, and so party identification cannot be measured for the historical population in the same way it can for present voters. There are some cases in which documents exist that give party identification for certain groups of past voters,[8] but these are very rare—certainly such information is not generally available from documentary sources. That means that a direct test of the theory's applicability is not possible. What one must do therefore is to draw out consequences of the theory that will permit an indirect test.

One such test may be described as follows. Let the elections of interest be those of the late-nineteenth century in the United States. Taking a series of presidential elections that for convenience we can number as 1 through n, one can then correlate the percent of the vote Democratic (Republican) for each election with that for every other. If the theory is true, one would expect to find that $r_{13} > (r_{12})^2$, $r_{14} > (r_{12})^3$, etc.—in other words, that the long-term tendency to vote one's party identification will dominate as the short-term factors wash out.[9] As Philip Converse has shown, that is in fact the case.[10] Hence here one has indirect evidence—but evidence nonetheless—that indicates that the theory is applicable in the late-nineteenth century.

Such applications of current models to historical data are not always justifiable. A classic example is Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross*.[11] What Fogel and Engerman did was to apply to the pre-Civil War South economic models currently used in the study of modern society—for example, Cobb-Douglas production functions. The problem here is that these are models created to explain the functioning of a competitive capitalist society that by definition includes a free market in labor. But these models are then applied to a slave society. One may argue that much labor in the Old South was not slave labor, but the explicit purpose of Fogel and Engerman in using these models was to demonstrate the productivity of slave labor. It should be obvious that such an application is at best dubious, and would certainly require an elaborate justification that Fogel and Engerman nowhere provide.

The truth is that we do not have an adequate economic model of a slave society, and since there are no societies presently in existence that maintain chattel slavery no such model can be developed on the basis of present observation. But there have been enough slave societies in the past, and enough is known about them, to make clear some at least of the factors that would have to be considered. For example, slaves resist. Any economic model of slavery would have to take that fact into account. The amount of resistance will clearly be a major factor, and if as seems plausible, resistance increases with the amount and intensity of labor demanded of the slaves, means will have to be employed to overcome that resistance—means that will surely involve costs. One would guess that there will be some level of labor required that cannot be exceeded without such a rise in cost that the marginal profit would decline. This is, of course, mere speculation, but it may serve to indicate why simply applying a model based on a free labor society to the Old South is a very questionable undertaking.

In cases like that of electoral behavior cited above there are statistical data against which the model can be tested. This is not the typical case; historical data are usually fragmentary. It is a rare situation indeed in which one has either aggregate data or data from probability samples from a past population. But we know enough about the processes affecting the generation and survival of historical data to know that those processes contain a large element of randomness.[12] There are, of course, biases operating—illiterates do not write letters, and more data will survive concerning the rich than the poor, the White than the Black, the famous than the obscure. There are even cases in which governmental or religious authorities have made systematic efforts to destroy certain classes of data—the Soviet government's attempts to censor data concerning the Russian Revolution and the Catholic Church's efforts to suppress information about Pelagius come to mind—but there are relatively few such cases in American history. Yet although the survival of the fragmentary data we have is largely the result of chance, standard statistical methods of hypothesis testing are not applicable in such cases. The best we can do is to look for a model that will successfully account for such data as exist, and that will continue to do so as new data come to light.

Attempts to reconstruct the culture of a past society are inevitably limited by the fragmentary character of historical data. There will always be some information vital to one's account that is simply not to be found. Does this mean that the enterprise must be abandoned? If one thinks of the study of culture as purely descriptive—as a simple empirical task of recording what is observed—the answer might well be yes. But ethnographic work is never purely descriptive in the classic empiricist sense. What one is doing is constructing a theory about what was there. Even in the contemporary case, where the ethnographer can see and talk to his subjects, the model of their culture always goes beyond what is simply observed. Psychological states such as motives and values are never simply observed, even when one has direct statements from the subjects; the subject often does not know his own motivation, or lies. Many cultural phenomena are not overt even to the members of the society. Famously, this is true of their language, even in literate societies such as our own. People constantly obey linguistic rules of which they are not aware and which they cannot articulate when asked. The ethnographer is to a considerable degree a theory builder. Compared to theories in some other domains of knowledge, ethnographic theories may be rather low level theories, but they are theories none the less. Anthropological practice tends to mask this fact because the creation of theory and its testing often take place simultaneously in the course of field work, but when the field worker "tries out" a native linguistic expression or a greeting ritual on members of the society he is testing his hypotheses to see if they stand up.

In the historical case, the theoretical nature of the ethnographic account is much more obvious, precisely because of the problem of missing data. A good example of this is furnished by the reconstructions of prehistoric creatures made by paleontologists. Such reconstructions are usually based on very fragmentary remains, but from those fragments and our knowledge of biology, a model can be created that integrates all the known data. So in history, given what we know about human societies in general and the fragmentary data we have, we seek to create a model that makes sense of the evidence we have and that will continue to do so as new fragments come to light.[13] In many cases, these theories have to be tested by indirect methods. But they can be tested, and to the degree that they survive the tests we are justified in believing that they are either true, or at least our best estimates of the truth.

Very often in studying past cultures, one cannot find data concerning the variable of interest. In many of these cases, what can be done is to find data respecting a surrogate variable that one has good reason to believe is correlated strongly to the variable of interest. For example, John Demos wanted to know if Puritan men divided adulthood into stages as they did childhood or if they treated it as an undifferentiated temporal expanse. Since there were no Puritan documents in which the matter was discussed, he looked at the ages at which Puritan men were elected to serve in various sorts of offices, the argument being that if the greater the responsibility and power of the office the greater the age at the time of election, this would indicate that Puritans did differentiate adulthood into distinct phases.[14] This sort of procedure is both necessary and legitimate in developing theories about past cultures, but it needs to be made explicit.

Examples of such theory construction and theory testing abound. We have all known, from the work of Charles Sydnor and many others, that colonial Virginia was a colony typified by elite rule, low population density, no major urban center, plantation agriculture, racially defined slavery, and white female purity. This description leaves one with many questions concerning the functioning of this society: how was mating dealt with, how did the ruling elite coordinate action, etc.? In this case, material culture helps us to construct a more satisfactory overall model. Philip Vickers Fithian gives a description of Nomini Hall, the plantation house of one of the wealthiest Virginia planters, Robert Carter.[15] Here on a plantation of twenty-five hundred acres with one hundred and fifty slaves, obviously at a considerable distance from the nearest neighbor, is a house seventy-six by forty-four feet with seventeen-foot ceilings on the first floor and twelve-foot ceilings on the second. In the layout as Fithian describes it, there are four rooms on each floor: on the first, a dining room, a children's dining room, Colonel Carter's study, and a thirty-foot long ball room; on the second floor, the parent's bedroom, a bedroom for the several daughters, and two rooms for guests. The sons do not sleep in the main house but in the school house 100 yards from the main house where the tutor and clerk also sleep. Clearly this house was designed, not just for the Carter family, (in fact, the main house does not house the complete family) but for a constant round of entertainment, and this is made abundantly clear by the list of annual provisions for the house, including four hogsheads of rum and 150 gallons of brandy.[16] Why would the Carters have built such a house? If one had children in Virginia and lived, as most planters did, as isolated from other like-statused families as the Carters did, there was the obvious problem of matchmaking. Lacking a major urban center, and with the closest young of mating age (the slaves, and the other employees such as the clerk) ineligible, one would have to import young people who were eligible. Hence the guest rooms, the ball room, the constant round of dances[17] and the emphasis on dancing[18] that one finds not only at Nomini Hall but in William Byrd's *Diary*[19] and elsewhere. And of course while the dancing went on and the mothers' eagle eyes made sure that the daughters, and the sons, did not make it to the bushes, there was opportunity for the men to retreat to the study to discuss tobacco prices, the next meeting of the House of Burgess, and similar affairs. Here the material culture serves to provide critical evidence about the working of the Virginia cultural system—evidence that both suggests hypotheses and helps to confirm hypotheses derived from quite different types of data. And that in itself is an important methodological point, for the biases affecting different types of data are not the same, and the ability of a theory to integrate multiple kinds of data is a mark in its favor.

One of the most interesting examples of this sort of model building is in Perry Miller's Puritans. In *The New England Mind*, Miller delineated a model of seventeenth-century Puritan New England in which he laid out the beliefs and motives that governed members of that society. Miller was in no sense a social scientist; he saw himself as a humanistic scholar and his work as an art, and one will not find discussions of methodology in Miller's writing; he would never discuss how he did what he did. But in looking at Miller's work, it is possible to see what he did. As George Selement[20] has noted, most of the sources that Miller cited in writing *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* were theological writings. But for a society dominated by religion and by a religious elite, theological writings were the best sources. Moreover, the fact that Miller did not cite certain documents does not mean that he had not read them. Selement estimates that the body of published sources relevant to New England available here and in Europe for the period 1620 to 1730 amounted to approximately fifteen hundred titles. As James Hoopes has shown,[21] Miller cited two hundred and twenty three of these in the notes to *The New England Mind*—about fifteen percent of the total. As anyone who has written a scholarly book knows, the works cited in the footnotes are never more than a small fraction of the material read. Morgan was right when he said Miller read it all;[22] whatever Miller's failings, shoddy scholarship was not among them.

Miller has been accused of ignoring the plurality of New England thought, of falsely imputing to New Englanders an orthodoxy they never had. In a much quoted passage, Miller said

> My project is made more practicable by the fact that the first three generations in New England paid almost unbroken allegiance to a unified body of thought, and that individual differences among particular writers or theorists were merely minor variations within a general frame. I have taken the liberty of treating the whole literature as though it were the product of a single intelligence, and I have appropriated illustrations from whichever authors happened to express a point most conveniently.[23]

But this passage has been misunderstood. What Miller was doing (though Miller would never had described it this way) was creating a model that captured the central tendencies of Puritan culture during the period he covered. Because New England was a very homogeneous society, the Puritans did have much in common in their intellectual and emotional lives. And because New England was a totalitarian society, the leaders had the power and the means to indoctrinate everyone, servants and slaves included, and to suppress dissent. But no model of this sort is ever true of every individual; humans are far too variable for that. The objective is to construct a model that fits most of the people so well that it can account for the major features of the society. The question to be asked about Miller's model is whether or not it succeeds in doing that.

To test the model, it is important to use data of a sort that Miller did not use in creating it. One such type of data is provided by New England town plans. It is no surprise that the initial Puritan settlement in New England was in towns; that was the standard English method of settling any new territory. The important point is that the New Englanders continued to settle in towns long after other colonists had moved to settlement by isolated farmstead. New Englanders tried to preserve the nucleated settlement and open field system already on the wane in England, and they did so because such a pattern not only fostered communalism but offered protection against sin—one's own as well as that of others—that isolated farmsteads did not.[24] This is exactly what one would expect given

Miller's model. A further type of data relevant here is Puritan gravestones. As David Watters[25] has shown, the elaborate typological images of the stones look forward to the resurrection and are literally sermons in stones of just the sort one would expect on Miller's model. Thus, here again material culture can be brought to bear to test the adequacies of an historical model.

Among the artifacts that remain to us from the past are the various art works produced by past societies—literature, paintings, music, etc. These are important categories of data—important to the societies concerned and to scholars seeking to reconstruct their cultures. The problem has always been how to use these types of data, and on this issue there has been more controversy than there should have been. For brevity sake, I will deal here chiefly with literature, but the extension to other arts should be obvious.

Works of art don't just happen; they are produced by certain people for certain purposes and for certain audiences. The audiences reached may not always be the ones intended, but for the general case one can assume the artist had some audience in view. The motives and intentions of the artists—especially writers—are usually researchable topics since these people tend to produce quantities of written materials that often survive. And those motives and intentions are highly variable over time—if Michael Wigglesworth wrote to propagate the Puritan gospel, more recent writers have usually written for a market. But that is not true of all writers—it was not true of Emily Dickinson. Indeed, I know of no more dramatic change in American literature than the disappearance of poetry from the popular market since World War I. Poets were widely read in the nineteenth century. But after the revolution that produced the new poetry of Ethan Pound, George Eliot, Stephen Crane, Wallace Stevens et al., modern poetry ceased to be intelligible even to the educated layman, let alone the ordinary person. There were of course exceptions, such as Robert Frost—one reason John Kennedy chose Frost as the poet for his inaugural. But most modern poetry is inaccessible to all but a few, and its place has been taken by the songs of celebrity singers. Clearly this change was not motivated by the poets' desire to maximize their profits. The motives of poets and other artists are complex and various, and require detailed ethnographic investigation. Studies of writers and artists as a group, or more accurately as a collection of groups, could be as interesting and useful as studies of tramps[26] or cocktail waitresses[27] or other subsets of the society, but they are small subsets and the characteristics of the artists hardly define their importance.

The social role of the artist is a matter of greater interest. It is also a cultural variable. The nineteenth-century "man of letters" no longer exists; those who are today regarded as "major" writers are generally opponents of the dominant culture. But what is a "major" writer? Those who are market successes, like Tom Clancy and Stephen King, are not those who win the plaudits of the literary elite. We have then an interesting conflict between market values and aesthetic values, and those who rate highest on one set of standards seem rarely to do on the other. Why this contradiction exists is a question of major importance.

Beyond writers themselves are the professional critics and reviewers—those whose role it is to inform audiences as to which among the various artistic products available are appropriate for them. These range all the way from the elite critics to the book clubs to the publishing house advertizers hawking their wares. And the standards of appraisal invoked by these people also vary over time. In nineteenth-century literary criticism, one of the most important evaluative concepts was the "sublime." Today the term has vanished from critical discourse. Aesthetic standards are themselves culturally constituted; one does not gaze on beauty bare but on beauty as dressed by one's culture. The whole process by which artistic works are appraised, and this appraisal is communicated to relevant audiences, is one that needs far more attention that it has received.

What is the role of artistic artifacts in the culture? That is the critical question, and to answer it requires determining how these works affect their audiences. This is a subject that screams for attention. No one who lived through the Rock revolution of the 1950s and 1960s can doubt that music involves fundamental values that go far beyond the aesthetic or the commercial. Why do certain works profoundly attract some audiences and leave others unmoved, or bitterly hostile? These are researchable issues, but oddly enough they have not been much researched.

We talk of "good" writing. What is "good" writing? Presumably it is writing that produces certain effects in a reader. What reader? And what effects? It is not hard to see that these questions can be experimentally investigated to determine what characteristics of writing evoke what responses from what readers. It may be that some of these responses are generic to human beings, but given what we know about cultural variability, they are very likely learned. That means that people are taught to respond in certain ways to certain characteristics of writing. After all, what English professors do in courses on poetry is to train students to respond in certain ways ("appreciate" is the term of art) to largely inscrutable sequences of words. Once so trained, these students can make "poetry" out of anything.[28] But every reader of the language has been trained, though not so formally and probably for the most part unconsciously, and if we are to understand why some writing is effective and other writing is not, we need to know how they have been trained to respond, and to what.

Similar comments apply at the cultural level. Why do certain types of books attract certain audiences and not others, and what do these audiences get from consuming that type of work? Why do some women read romances[29] and some men read mysteries?[30] What does the consumption of such formula fiction do for the consumer? How does such material influence the readers? The techniques required to investigate these questions exist and are widely available—sampling, interviews, questionnaires, etc.—but the work goes largely undone, because—as one literary scholar of my acquaintance put it—such work would be "unclean."

The result is that we have at present no empirically grounded theories of how people with certain types of training and cultural conditioning respond to various types of artistic works—taking "artistic" in the broadest terms. Nor do we have any theories concerning how and why these responses change over time. Yet these questions are of crucial importance for they involve everything from concepts of the body beautiful that so concern feminists to the standards determining the literary canon, from the popularity of science fiction to the idolization of Elvis, and from the power of William Jennings Bryan's oratory to the popularity of "I Love Lucy." To the extent that such studies are being done, they are in communications and sociology, but remarkably little has been done in psychology or social psychology or in other fields.

The importance of such work goes beyond what it can tell us about contemporary society and culture, for in trying to reconstruct the past, these problems are particularly difficult. There is a reasonable chance that data concerning artists and even critics and reviewers from past eras can be found; data concerning the responses of audiences are exceedingly sparse and fragmentary. Here as in other areas we shall have to rely on the leverage provided by theories based on current data, and use the ability of such theories to integrate the fragments from the past to confirm or infirm them indirectly. But there are significant historical data revelant to these issues. For example, there is substantial material concerning American educational practices and curricula in the past that will give us some grasp of how readers were trained. Children who were required to memorize thousands of lines of poetry are likely to have formed their concepts of poetry and their reading habits on that basis. There are therefore possibilities of constructing models of the role of the arts in past societies that have not been explored but should be.

Our task in the study of historical cultures is to develop models of those cultures that account as fully as possible for the actions of the members of the societies in question. In doing this, we can and should utilize all the resources at our command, both the known data and theories and concepts drawn from other times and places. But these theories and concepts will never be enough; we shall have to devise theories of our own, deriving our concepts from the data and hypothesizing relationships among them that fit the information we have. It is precisely because we face severe problems of missing data that we need to create theories that bridge these gaps and integrate the fragments we do have. But having done so, we have to test those models as rigorously as we can. These tests, given the incompleteness of the historical record, must often be indirect, and should utilize data not used or not known when the model was created. This demands several things of us: to elaborate our models—to tease out from them consequences not at first obvious that can be tested, to find surrogate variables that are determinable when the variables of interest are not, and to explore the full range of data remaining from a past society, remembering that anything made or used by members of a past society is the answer to some questions about the culture of that society. The better our models can account for newly found data, or for different types of data, or for information extracted from old data by new methods, the more justification we have for trusting them.

The second objective in studying American culture is to add to our understanding of culture in general. American culture, past and present, is but one among the world's thousands of cultures, and it can and should be seen in comparison to others in the search for generalizations about cultural phenomena. But American culture has the signal advantage of being relatively well documented over a considerable period of time. Only the American South has known the destruction of military conquest, and that only once; American records are remarkably rich. In particular, American civilization offers great opportunities for the study of cultural change. It is obvious that all studies of long-term cultural change are and must be at least in part historical, and the relative richness of the American record should provide a suitable base for such work. Thus, for example, Anthony Wallace's theory of revitalization movements grew out of his historical study of the Handsome Lake movement among the Seneca, and was then generalized into an important cross-cultural theory of religious and cultural revival.[31]

American cultural history offers some remarkable opportunities to study processes that have cross-cultural and even universal significance. Studies of acculturation have drawn heavily on the experience of the American Indians in their response to the incursions of Europeans. More generally, the United States is an ideal field for the study of ethnicity. That the United States has experienced massive immigration is well known, and there are now many studies of immigrants to this country. But such studies need to be more broadly conceived than has usually been the case. First, as William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki[32] showed long ago, the study of immigrants should include the study of the cultures from which they came, since the culture they brought with them affected their fate here. Further, we need to know not only about those who came but about those who came and went back, and about those who never came at all. Relations between immigrants here and their relatives in the homeland often continued through two or three generations and in some cases even longer, with resources flowing in both directions, yet we know relatively little about these extended relationships. Second, immigrants to the United States need to be studied in relation to the host culture they entered. Ethnic studies programs that focus on the immigrant groups alone may have great appeal to ethnic chauvinism and to those who believe that all human relationships are reducible to power, but they make as much sense as one hand clapping. Third, because so many different ethnic groups have existed in the United States, it is possible to study the differences in the careers of these groups in dealing with a single host culture. But forth, in addition to holding the host culture constant and varying the immigrant groups, we need to hold ethnicity constant and vary the host cultures. Thus, for example, at the same time that Italian immigrants were coming to the United States they were also going in large numbers to Argentina, where they found a very different type of host culture, and met with a different reception. Comparisons of such cases would make it possible to sort out what is due to the ethnic group and what to the host culture, something that cannot be done by looking only at the U.S. case.

Fifth, the interactions among ethnic groups need detailed study. When people from other lands came to the United States, they brought with them all of the ethnic hatreds that characterized their home populations, and those hatreds had important consequences here. The Irish and the English could no more get along in Boston than in Belfast. Sixth, ethnicity is a cultural resource that people tend to emphasize in circumstances where it is advantageous and to deemphasize in circumstances where it is disadvantageous. What these circumstances are—why, for example, many people suddenly became ethnics in the 1960s who had not claimed that distinction in the 1950s—is a question of considerable interest. Thus, the United States offers a splendid opportunity for the study of ethnic phenomena, but one the full riches of which can only be exploited by viewing the United States as one part of a much broader set of international processes.

Much the same situation prevails in the study of race relations. In a country that now includes major subpopulations of four different races, the interaction among racial groups and among racial and ethnic groups raises all the issues noted above and more. Race in the United States is a social category rather than a biological one, but it differs from ethnicity in that the defining features of race are taken to be physical characteristics that are visible rather than country of origin, though race and ethnicity often overlap, as in the case of recent Asian immigrants. Attitudes toward members of other races differ from those toward members of other ethnicities, and problems of racial assimilation and integration are even more complex than those involving ethnicity. Again, these are issues that need to be approached in a cross-cultural context, and ones to the understanding of which the study of American civilization can make a major contribution.

It is a central paradox of American civilization that nowhere else in the world has industrial capitalism so dominated a nation, and yet religion continues to be an important factor in American life. That market values now permeate every aspect of our culture can be news to no one, yet these values clearly contradict those of the religions that an astonishingly large percentage of the American population profess to believe. Given the worldwide domination of capitalism today, one wonders how these value conflicts are dealt with, and what consequences they will have in countries like Iran and Afghanistan where religious practice is far more rigorous than here. Hypocrisy is not a new phenomenon in human affairs, but it has rarely been so blatant as in the relation of capitalism and religion.

America offers one of the most remarkable cases on record of the integration of culturally distinct regions into a single culture. This process of integration has not always been peaceful—the Civil War is properly seen as part of this process—but for the most part integration has been achieved without violence.[33] How this result was brought about and the conditions that made it possible are questions with a relevance that transcends American history, as the post-World War II progress of Europe toward some form of integration makes clear.

It would be easy to extend this list of topics, the investigation of which could make significant contributions to cross-cultural study, but these should suffice to make the point, which is after all obvious. The study of culture in general is a cross-cultural enterprise. What the study of American civilization can contribute to it is the study of a particular case, or set of cases, viewed as instances or components of general cultural processes and systems. That is an important contribution since cross-cultural study depends upon having accurate and insightful studies of individual cases. And of course, the more we know about culture in general, the better equipped we are to understand the particular cases in our own domain.

What bearing does all this have on the disciplinary status of American civilization? My readers are, I assume, denizens of academic institutions and have been socialized in the standard departmental categories of academic life. So far as I can tell, most academics believe that departments exist as ideas in the mind of God, pure, sacred, and inviolable. I have frequently been told that departments are the custodians of distinct disciplines and that to challenge the sanctity of departmentalization is to confound disciplines and create academic chaos. But what are disciplines? Stanley Bailis defines disciplines as "systems composed of related conceptions, methodologies, and subject-matter claims pertaining to a material field—i.e., to a common-sense domain of objects and events that the discipline studies."[34] Daniel Patrick Moynihan defines a discipline as "a methodology, a vocabulary, a body of theory and doctrine, a set of refined techniques, a large professional following."[35] The latter definition seems too rigid; physics remained physics despite the quantum revolution. I think the former is closer to what most academics understand by a discipline, with the qualification that the components of a discipline may change by incorporating new concepts and methods, by deleting old ones no longer serviceable, or by expanding or contracting the material field.

So defined, departments are not synonymous with disciplines. What is the disciplinary difference between anthropology and sociology? It is said that anthropology studies culture and sociology studies social interaction. But think of any social interaction—say, two people meeting and shaking hands. Obviously every aspect of this interaction is governed by cultural rules; one cannot study the one without studying the other. Nor is participant observation in any sense unique to anthropology; sociologists make extensive use of it, as do folklorists and many others. Or consider English departments. What is the discipline of English? If one looks at what English departments actually *do*, they do three things: they teach writing, they study the history of literature, and they study literary criticism. These make a discipline? German departments, French departments, Spanish departments, Slavic departments all do exactly the same things, the only difference being the languages involved, which they also teach. Yet the histories of the nations whose languages and literatures these are are taught in a single department of history in most American colleges and universities. Why not put the history of literature into the history department where it obviously belongs, and have separate departments of language instruction, of writing, and of literary criticism, taught across languages just as history is? That would make better intellectual sense than the current arrangement. This is perhaps the reason for the present popularity in English departments of "literary theory;" lacking a discipline of one's own, one claims everyone else's. And what is the discipline of philosophy? There is no agreement as to what it is—certainly there is none among philosophers. Most departments do not correspond one to one to disciplines and never have; many are holding companies for a variety of distinct disciplines, and many cannot be distinguished on disciplinary grounds.

The point is that the real world does not divide according to academic departmental lines. If one is interested in the real world, existing departmental lines must be breached. The study of American civilization is the study of the total civilization, including what we usually label as economics, politics, literature, class, ethnicity, etc. None of these can be understood in isolation from the others. Cultures are systems of interacting parts, and to understand the system the relations among the parts must be studied, whether that requires crossing the barriers between departments and so-called disciplines or not.

Departments are bureaucratic devices through which universities deal with personnel problems. Some departments, like mathematics, do correspond to disciplines, in the sense that they have a specific type of subject matter that is studied in a particular way. But many departments do not. There is some dim understanding of that among academic apparatchiks—hence the current fad of "interdisciplinary studies," which for them turns out to mean interdepartmental studies. That misunderstanding, of course, defeats the purpose since academics must seek their advancement by endearing themselves to the deities of their home departments and are not likely to be equally rewarded for whoring after foreign gods. Interdepartmental studies usually result in each participant defending his/her department's particular view, to the considerable confusion of the students who are then left to create—somehow—a synthesis their teachers either cannot or will not make.

Departments ought to be ways of providing a coherent organization of scholars to deal with significant aspects of the real world. That can, and often should, mean combining multiple disciplines in a single department whose members deal with the same subject. The problem here is not to be "interdisciplinary"—literally, between disciplines—but to synthesize the relevant disciplines so that a coherent understanding of the subject results. Where the relevant approaches have in common an empirical orientation to the subject and share an understanding of what constitutes explanation, evidence, theory, and confirmation, they can and should be combined into a single more general discipline that can yield a holistic and consistent model of the subject. Economics and religion are interrelated, as Max Weber showed;[36] Miller's Puritans and Fogel's capitalists shared a common ethic. Politics, religion, ethnicity, and race are inseparable, as Lee Benson,[37] Richard Jensen,[38] Paul Kleppner,[39] and others have demonstrated. Residence, race, architecture, marriage, and politics are intertwined, and not only in Virginia.[40] It is not enough to lock an economist, a political scientist, an anthropologist, and a historian in the same room for two hours a week—what that produces is just four frustrated academics. What is essential is that variables from one type of theory be related to those in other sorts of theories, which means that new theories must be created, new methods invented, new sorts of evidence utilized—in short, a new discipline formed. This is the basic task of American civilization as an academic field, and there is every bit as much justification for this sort of organization as for the traditional one. Indeed, there can be, and often is, far more intellectual coherence to a department of American civilization than there is to a department of English.

University administrators are corporate executives who are (with rare exceptions) more interested in budgets, facilities, personnel policies, consumer satisfaction (and the satisfaction of consumers' parents), and advertising than in truth. One should not expect originality, creativity, or intellectual integrity from such people—unless there is money in it. Those of us who inhabit the lower echelons of such corporate structures will always have to wage war against the rigidity of these organizations and their apparatchiks and the going will be hard. But in the long run it will be worth it. The justification for universities is not to certify that there are so many course units per square head, but to advance knowledge and to teach it. We should do what we came to do, and to hell with the administration.

Notes

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14. John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth* (New York, 1970), 171ff.
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17. *Ibid.*, 62-64, 76, 94-96, passim.
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