



American Studies from Culture Concept to Cultural Studies?

Introduction

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Sometimes committee work, which academics profess to loathe, has a salutary intellectual result. During the 1992-93 academic year I chaired the search committee for a full-time tenure-track position in American Studies at the University of Kansas—our first such recruitment in over twenty years. As I waded through each of the more than 300 applications we received, what struck me most forcefully was how differently this younger generation of scholars defined themselves and their work. There was, to be sure, plenty of obligatory rhetoric extolling the virtues of interdisciplinarity, and there was a plethora of dissertations focusing on what to older generations would appear to be frivolous, esoteric, “hip” subjects that seemed simply to provide legitimacy to indulge one’s fantasies or fascinations with contemporary popular icons.

What was most striking about this pool of applicants, however, was, first, the extent to which their interests were articulated and framed in theoretical terms; although earlier generations of American Studies scholars had certainly approached their substantive interests with certain theoretical assumptions, seldom were these so self-consciously and prominently displayed as they were by this generation of scholars. Second, the theoretical perspectives they embraced were drawn from a host of scholars with whom I was only obliquely familiar; many of them—Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, for example—were not even American in their backgrounds or in the substantive focus of their work. And the notions of “cultural studies” that they consistently invoked were vaguely and disquietingly different than the anthropo-

logical traditions on which I had been weaned during the early 1960s. It rapidly became apparent to me that a paradigm shift of major proportions had taken place in the study of American life and culture.

I was fascinated both by the conceptual *content* of this new “cultural studies”—how it defined itself—and the impact it was having on American studies, both in the United States and abroad. Even more intriguing to me, however, was the question of how and why it had occurred: how had “cultural studies” emerged to such prominence? What had changed in our conceptual understanding of American studies and, especially, of the concept of “culture”? What had been the social, political, cultural, intellectual, and personal sources of these changes? In other words, how and why had American studies changed conceptually in the past quarter century and what were the implications of these changes?

During the spring break of 1995 I had an opportunity to reflect on these questions and shared them in a lengthy conversation with David Katzman. I suggested that we might think of organizing a special issue of the *American Studies* devoted specifically to the topic of conceptual shifts in the field. In his typically imaginative manner, David suggested that we propose that the Mid-America American Studies Association (MAASA) organize a conference around this theme and that we then invite conference participants to revise their papers for publication in *American Studies*.

Subsequently, the MAASA executive committee enthusiastically endorsed the idea of devoting its spring 1996 conference in St. Louis to the topic, “From Culture Concept to Cultural Studies? Changing Models of American Studies.” The call for papers read:

The conference seeks papers that will address the state of American Studies today as a scholarly enterprise and as a teaching field. It will focus on the changing assumptions, models, paradigms, approaches, and conceptual frameworks that have emerged recently in the American Studies movement. It will seek especially to explore the ‘imperatives’ [Gene Wise’s term] that have undergirded research and teaching since Wise’s 1979 article and consider the implications of the changes for American Studies in the twenty-first century.

We invited six scholars—Jay Mechling, Richard Horwitz, Doris Friedensohn, Barry Shank, Mark Hulsether, and De Witt Douglas Kilgore—to prepare and present plenary papers on the topic to the St. Louis meeting. Three of these individuals (Mechling, Horwitz, and Friedensohn) have been prominent participants in the American Studies movement for at least twenty-five years. The other three—Shank, Hulsether, and Kilgore—received their doctorates and their first permanent academic appointment relatively recently. Although divided by

generational (as well as their own individual substantive, methodological, and conceptual) differences, all had received their doctorates in American Studies/Civilization doctoral programs, an experience that we believed would especially sensitize them to the history of how the study of American civilization has evolved and, thus, effectively to consider the impact cultural studies has had on American Studies and the conditions under which this occurred. Finally, we asked three other prominent scholars—Albert Stone, James Farrell, and Steven Watts—to serve as critics of the plenary papers.

The articles published here are revisions of the plenary papers presented at the 1996 St. Louis conference. The authors were given the opportunity to reflect on the responses of the formal critics of their papers as well as the critical comments that their conference papers elicited from participants (who had been mailed copies of the papers before the conference began). We believe that, considered collectively, these essays represent the most definitive recent statement of where American Studies has been and where it appears to be heading. As membership in the American Studies Association continues to grow and colleges and universities throughout the United States and abroad continue to create new programs focusing on American culture, the implications of numerous issues that these articles raise become increasingly relevant.

The authors offer reflections on American Studies as an idea and as a movement, and provide divergent perspectives explaining where we are now and how we got here. At the same time, they attempt to assess the impact and utility of cultural studies within the field. In devoting this issue of *American Studies* to their discussions, we hope to stimulate further debate over where American Studies and its practitioners are, and where they are headed.