

Perry Miller and American Studies

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American civilization/American studies is a well established field, and, it seems worthwhile to look back to the beginnings to see if those who launched this enterprise some seventy years ago might have something to teach us today. American studies, like most fields, has its origin myths, and there are not a few who have bid for the honor of founder. But with due respect to those honored dead, I believe the most important single figure in launching American civilization was Perry Miller. That was not, I should hasten to add, any part of Miller's intention; for a variety of reasons, most of them personal, he kept his distance from the American History and Literature program at Harvard, but if one looks at who he taught and at what he did, Miller's imprint is unmistakable. That he was a great teacher needs saying only to those who never sat in his classroom. That he was a spellbinding lecturer is well known; more importantly, he could inspire, and a host of dissertations, articles and books have been written by people whose passion for their subjects was kindled by him. But Miller's greatest gift to posterity was what he wrote.

It was sixty-one years ago that Miller, then thirty-four years old, published the first volume of the *New England Mind*.¹ The impact of that book, and of the second volume that came a war later,² have been remarkable. Miller of course did not rediscover the Puritans; they were never lost, and scholarly writing about them is continuous through the nineteenth century. Moreover, at Harvard in the 1920s and 1930s, Kenneth Murdock³ and Samuel Eliot Morison were writing about the Puritans; Morison's *History of Harvard College*,⁴ published to com-

memorate the tercentenary of the founding of Harvard, was a major work of both intellectual and educational history. But Miller redefined the field. The *New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* was like no book that had appeared before. Leonard Labaree, a Yale professor specializing in colonial American history, found it unintelligible. He said it was like watching Einstein at the blackboard; he could tell that something profound was going on but he could not tell what it was. That is no comment on Labaree, who was a fine historian; rather, it is a testimony to how original Miller's work was. Others, many of them Miller's students such as Edmund Morgan, did understand what Miller was doing, and his work established the model of the New England Puritans for succeeding generations. Sixty-one years later, the hold of that model is still powerful; scholars writing on New England Puritans uniformly find it necessary to deal with what Miller has said, whether they agree with it or not. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the course of subsequent research on New England Puritans was in large part dictated by the paradigm that Miller created.

Perry Miller has been called an intellectual historian. In the 1940s, intellectual history was the hot field in American history, and a number of very able people worked in that field.⁵ Perhaps the most outstanding were Ralph Gabriel, whose *Course of American Democratic Thought*⁶ was a classic, and Merle Curti, whose *Growth of American Thought*⁷ was greatly admired. There were also bright young men like Richard Hofstadter, whose *Social Darwinism in American Thought*⁸ and *American Political Tradition*⁹ were widely acclaimed. But a comparison of those works with Miller's *New England Mind* only shows how different Miller's work was. While of course he dealt with Puritan thought, he was not an intellectual historian in any traditional sense.

Miller called himself—at least sometimes—an historian of ideas. In the 1940s, that term was well understood to mean the sort of thing Lovejoy did—tracing ideas across the centuries as in *The Great Chain of Being*.¹⁰ In that sense, Miller was never an historian of ideas. If he used the term—and he did—it rather reflected the fact that there was no term available in the professional lexicon of historians to describe what he did. Miller's originality was greater than he himself realized. Officially, he was a professor of American literature, though given the ambiguity of the word "literature" as applied to writings of the colonial period, that appointment imposed little if any limitations on him. But he was not simply an interdisciplinary scholar either—whatever one takes that abused buzzword to mean. Miller was a scholar of a "form of life," and disciplinary boundaries were simply irrelevant to him.

Of course, Miller was in rebellion against the reigning orthodoxies of his day. He was born in Chicago in 1905 and entered the University of Chicago in 1922. He grew up in the Progressive Era when the dominant paradigms in American history were the sort of economic determinism championed by Beard and the frontier thesis of Turner. When Miller published his first book, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, in 1933, he levelled his guns at the Beardian school.

I lay myself open to the charge of being so very naive as to believe that the way men think has some influence upon their actions, of not remembering that these ways of thinking have been officially decided by modern psychologists to be generally just so many rationalizations constructed by the subconscious to disguise the pursuit of more tangible ends. . . . I am prepared to hazard the thesis that whatever may be the case in other centuries, in the sixteenth and seventeenth certain men of decisive importance took religion seriously; that they often followed spiritual dictates in comparative disregard of ulterior considerations. . . .¹¹

Beard was of course only the proximal target of these remarks; they were aimed more broadly at the Marxists in general. This did not amount to any dismissal of the importance of economic factors in civilization. Miller was a New Deal Democrat with leftist leanings (though not as leftist as he sometimes like to pretend when talking with those who were truly leftists). He understood perfectly the importance of economics, but he also understood, as so many did not, that crude economic reductionism falsifies rather than clarifies, and that ideas play a causal role in human culture. Nor did Miller fail to appreciate the importance of Turner's work, but he had a far more sophisticated understanding of the role of the frontier than Turner.¹²

Miller was also in revolt against the Freudian interpretations that were so pervasive in his youth. Of course he read and understood Freud—he used to assign *The Interpretation of Dreams* in classes as a cultural document his students should know. But he had little use for the sort of Freudian treatment of “literature” practiced by men like Lewisohn.¹³ While he can hardly be said to have been a follower of any psychological school, his admiration for William James's *Psychology* was more than simply historical, and James's pragmatic view of ideas and his emphasis on the creativity of the human intelligence were, if not influences upon Miller, at least consonant with his beliefs.

What then was it that Miller did? What made his model of the New England Puritans so compelling? First, Miller saw the conceptual system, not just of the Puritans but of any society, as defining for the members of that society what their world is and how it is to be used. In his view, ideas are tools or instruments that serve functions for those who hold them. But they are more than just tools; they define reality. What there is, what the world is, is defined for us, as for any people, by what we think it is. Whether the universe began fifteen billion years ago or 6004 years ago, whether the earth is the center of the universe or a minor planet orbiting a third rate star, whether lightening is electricity or divine power, whether disease is caused by natural agents or by divine judgment, these are questions that are answered by our system of beliefs. And when rational men plan actions, they plan their actions in terms of the world as it is—that is, the

world as they think it is—that is, the world as their system of beliefs defines it. Miller had therefore to delineate the whole structure of beliefs about the world held by his subjects if he was to make sense of their actions. Their physics as well as their logic, their theology as well as their rhetoric, their ideas of causation as well as their concept of metaphor—all of these had to be included.

But second, the system of belief defines something more than the world—it defines us. Whether we are part angels and part animals or just very smart apes; whether we are immortal or cease to exist when we die; whether we are good or evil—these questions too are answered for us by the system of beliefs held by our society. What a self is, what it can and cannot do, what its fate is, these are critical issues for understanding people and their actions, because people plan their actions in terms of what they think they can do, what capacities they think they have, and what they think they ought to do.

Third, it is a truism that humans live in society; that is, they interact with other persons. But what is a person? If we limit the domain of persons to our fellow human beings, our social relations take on one form; if we extend it to include persons such as God, Satan, witches, wizards, angels, daemons, etc., our social relations take a very different form. When Edwards said of Sarah Pierpont that she seemed to have someone invisible always talking with her,¹⁴ he did not mean that she was schizophrenic. The Puritan world included a vast array of supernatural beings whose powers for good or ill dwarfed those of humans, and actions had always to be planned in terms of how they would affect them. Indeed, one's relations to these supernatural beings were far more important than one's relations with one's fellow humans.

Fourth, it is the system of belief that defines experience. It is no doubt true that all people not impaired have similar capacities for experience, but it is certainly the case that some types of experience are cultivated in certain societies and not in others, and that the way experiences are interpreted varies radically from one society to another. Had St. Paul been a citizen of the United States in 2000 a.d., he would probably have been classified as an epileptic and his vision of Jesus dismissed as a clinical symptom of a seizure. Yet what happened on the road to Damascus changed Western history because it was interpreted as a true experience of the divine. So when Cotton Mather, after spending the day on his knees in fervent prayer and fasting, received a feeling that melted him into tears of joy, he *knew* it was from God, whatever cynical moderns may think.¹⁵

But fifth, none of these elements taken separately, nor all of them together, are enough. One must go further and ask, why do people believe what they believe? In the case of the Puritans, what made these beliefs credible or compelling or thrilling for them? Miller always believed that if you could not understand what the Puritans felt, you could not understand what they thought. Of course you could lay out the formulae and mouth the words they used, but unless you knew what they felt, you would never know what it all meant to them. If ideas are tools, you have to know what needs the use of those tools satisfies.

When Miller wrote the *New England Mind*, he started with the chapter on the Augustinian strain of piety because he knew that unless he could communicate to his readers what the emotional basis of Puritan beliefs was, the intellectual system the Puritans built would appear simply ingenious, arcane and boring. The techniques he employed there are literary techniques—Miller was not an English professor for nothing—and that chapter is brilliantly written; he does manage to get across, as well as anyone could do it discursively in so few pages, what those people felt. And if you once grasp that, then what follows is a perfectly brilliant delineation of the ideational system the Puritans used to deal with those problems.

Perry Miller was an atheist. But from comments he made at times, I think his atheism was that of a man who had rejected the faith of his family, who were I gather at one time deeply affected by George Herron. Whatever the reason, Miller understood the exquisite agony of the existential dilemma which he saw not just as a cultural phenomenon but as a universal result of the human condition. It is no accident that Miller worked chiefly on religious groups—Puritans, Transcendentalists, those caught up in the Darwinian controversy—and that his forays into other domains were much less successful. Atheist or not, Miller was deeply sensitive to the concerns underlying religion, and it was this that enabled him to understand Puritans without being a Puritan, to appreciate their anguish without accepting their answers.

The model of New England Puritanism Miller created brought them alive. Seeing then as Miller saw them, suddenly one could see what they were about, why they believed as they did, and why they acted as they did. For all his emphasis on ideas, it was ideas as premises for action that Miller described; once you understood what they felt and believed, their actions made sense. One could understand why they continued settlement in nucleated towns long after everyone else in the colonies abandoned it, why Massachusetts law forbid anyone to live alone, why they allowed only saints to vote and hold office, why they wrote introspective journals, why they would not permit the display of the cross, and so on. Of course people had known that the Puritans behaved this way before Miller came along, but their behavior had seemed bizarre or perverse. What Miller did was to provide a key to the meaning of these actions so that—quite suddenly and astonishingly—one could see what they meant. And the next generation of Miller's students—people like Morgan—carried on this program of research and interpretation with stunning success. After Miller, Puritan studies became the hottest field in American history, as Miller's students, and his students's students, carried the torch he had lit into one dark room of Puritan life after another. It was a magnificent achievement. It still is.

Anyone familiar with the literature of American history knows the pattern of vision, revision, and rerevision that characterizes the trade. Miller's model of the Puritans has of course been attacked, sometimes fairly, sometimes unfairly. Thus Miller has been accused of ignoring the plurality of New England thought,

of falsely imputing to New Englanders an orthodoxy they never had.¹⁶ In a much quoted passage, Miller did say

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 the point most conveniently.¹⁷

As subsequent scholarship has shown, there is more diversity in New England Puritanism than Miller described, so there is some justice to the criticism. But there is also a sense in which it misses the point. And the point is one not easily made in the language of the humanities. What Miller did was to create a model of New England Puritanism that sought to capture the central thrust of Puritan thought over the period that he covered. Such a model can never include everything; humans are far too variable for that. The objective is to construct a model that not only fits most of the people but fits so many so well that it can account for major features of the society. In the language of the social sciences where one can talk of distributions, central tendencies, and variances, the point is easily made; in the language of the humanities it is more difficult to make, and the way I have put it is not one Miller himself would have used. No doubt the model requires refinement, which it is receiving, but this should not obscure how much it does explain.

Questions have also been raised about the range of data Miller used. It is quite true that Miller cited chiefly theological writings and that he did not cite such things as town records or legal briefs.¹⁸ But what Miller was describing was the Puritan system of beliefs, and for that the theological writings were the best source. Furthermore, Miller wrote at a time when historians cited what they actually used instead of everything ever written on a subject whether they had read it or not, as is now often done. I have worked on Puritan legal codes, court records, town plans, diaries, and material culture, and the degree to which Miller's model fits those data is remarkable. George Selement estimated that the body of published sources relevant to New England available here and in Europe for the period 1620 to 1730 amounted to about fifteen hundred titles.¹⁹ Of these, Miller cites two hundred and twenty-three—fifteen percent of the total²⁰—and he had read far more. When Morgan said he read it all,²¹ I think he was right.

Miller has also been accused of creating a static model of New England Puritanism. In a sense, the first volume of the *New England Mind* is static; it attempts to delineate the Puritan system at a particular time. But that surely

cannot be said for the second volume, the whole point of which is what happened to that system as New England moved into the eighteenth century. Miller was particularly fascinated by the way in which new experiences broke the mould of old ideas, forced reinterpretations and changes, usually before people realized they were changing anything, until one day they discovered that what they had always believed they believed was not what they really believed at all. This is why he found Cotton Mather so interesting; a man who for all his brilliance (and brilliant he surely was) strove to combine the new with the old without fully understanding what the result would be. And this is why he so admired Edwards, whom he saw as the one mind in America of that era that not only saw the problems accurately but met them with a creative genius unrivalled in his time. That Miller's work, half a century after it was written, should require correction and amplification is hardly surprising; he was a pioneer who opened up a new domain, and those who have come after him have had much to do. Yet it would be wrong to leave the impression that Miller's scholarship was anything less than superb. As Edmund Morgan wrote of him

Only one who has studied all the raw materials for himself can fully appreciate the beauty of those patterns in the *New England Mind* or how faithfully they encompass the materials of New England history during the period that he covered. A few of us have studied some of them, but to do so and then to read or reread Miller is to be stunned not only by his familiarity with the sources but by the way he has put into a paragraph interpretations and observations which one might expect to find as the conclusions of a whole monograph. And good monographs have been written, are being written, and doubtless will be written to document in detail what Miller has already said.²²

This, from the best colonial historian of the generation after Miller, is as high praise as even Miller could ask, and Miller was not noted for modesty. And the experience Morgan describes is one that many of us have had when we have with blood, sweat and tears uncovered something about the Puritans we thought was a new discovery, and then found that, somewhere in the *New England Mind*, Miller had already said it, and said it better than we could.

At the same time Miller was writing the *New England Mind*, several anthropologists were working along very similar lines—notably Robert Redfield²³ and A. I. Hallowell.²⁴ Miller knew nothing of their work, and they knew nothing of his, yet the parallel between what Miller did with the Puritans and what Hallowell did with the Ojibwas is striking. The anthropologists called what they were doing the study of “world view.” In a brilliant paper published in 1954

under the title “The Self and Its Behavioral Environment,” Hallowell laid out the theory of world view, with copious illustrations from his field work. The world view of a society is the way the self and its environment look to the members of the society. The environment here is not necessarily the “real” environment; it is the “behavioral environment,” meaning the environment as people in the society conceive it to be. Hallowell defined a set of five “orientations” that are the variables of the theory: the self orientation (how the self is conceived), the spatio-temporal orientation (the nature and extent of time and space and the society’s locations in them), the object orientation (which defines what sorts of objects exist in the environment, including what persons there are), the motivational orientation (which defines how objects can be used to satisfy needs), and the normative orientation (which provides values, ideals and standards). These orientations are found in every world view, though of course their content varies from one to another. Like Miller, Hallowell stressed how the view of the world of a society articulates with the psychological needs of its members, which he was able to determine by the use of Rorschach tests and similar means. The upshot of Hallowell’s work is a brilliant model of Ojibwa culture, in which the world view supports a unique personality structure that in turn helps to create and sustain the world view. Taking this emotional-conceptual-perceptual system as a premise, Hallowell was able to explain many aspects of Ojibwa behavior, and to demonstrate how the culture functions; he was also able to account for its response to the acculturation imposed upon it by white society. There are few studies in the social sciences as beautiful as Hallowell’s study of the Ojibwa.²⁵

Hallowell’s work makes an interesting comparison to Miller’s. Even from the all too brief remarks above, it is obvious that there are many similarities. There are also important differences. Miller was a humanistic scholar; he was in no sense a social scientist. He would never discuss how he did what he did; for him it was an art. He read it all, he synthesized it, and he used literary techniques to communicate his results. And it should be remarked that he wrote brilliantly. Volume one of the *New England Mind* was rewritten five times, according to his own account, and his success in communicating so difficult a content so well is a testament to his literary and dramatic gifts. Such work cannot be replicated, which is why no one has ever written the third volume of the *New England Mind* and no one ever will. Hallowell was a social scientist; he used participant observation, field work, historical sources, and psychological tests, and he was scrupulously careful to explain his methods. Hallowell’s work can be replicated; Miller’s cannot.

Miller often talked about New England as a laboratory in which one could see certain processes in operation—for example, the interaction of Europeans with the wilderness, the effects of separation from the mother country, etc. These themes are important in his work, but he rarely drew cross-cultural comparisons. Hallowell always saw the Ojibwa in a cross-cultural perspective. The theory

of the world view he formulated was intended to be universal, with the Ojibwa as one instance. Each man was true to his field, though one often felt that Miller chaffed at the localism of his subjects.

Both men practiced what today would be called microanalysis. They took a particular society which they treated as an integrated whole and they explored it in great depth and with exquisite sensitivity to its peculiarities. This does not mean however that they were not interested in change. Volume II of the *New England Mind* is a study in change—a study of how the culture of early Puritans changed over time. Similarly, Hallowell's studies of Ojibwa acculturation are studies of change due to the impact of an alien culture. Nor does it mean that they could not deal with diversity. When Miller turned to the phenomenon of Transcendentalism, he focused not just on the small group of Transcendentalists but on the whole controversy among the various Calvinist factions, the Unitarians, and the Transcendentalists. Characteristically, he strove to find the underlying dynamics of this bitter battle and was exasperated by superficial solutions—a feeling that once led him to remark: "this five-cornered, knock-down, drag-out fight is what Van Wyck Brooks—god bless his simple soul—has called the flowering of New England!" Miller loved controversy, but again it was controversy and diversity within a relatively small group. One is therefore left with the question of how broadly this sort of micro-analysis can be generalized. Can it for example be applied to every group?

The societies on which Miller worked were historical societies that left a rich body of documentary material that revealed their beliefs and emotions. But could one apply Miller's techniques to a society like early Virginia where such materials are notably lacking? Miller did write an article on the early Virginia ministers;²⁶ whether he ever contemplated further work on Virginia I do not know, but he never did it. No one has ever written *The Virginia Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. One must approach seventeenth century Virginia with different tools than the ones Miller used. The same thing is unfortunately true of many groups in American history; Irish immigrants in the Midwest in the middle of the nineteenth century did not write treatises. And obviously participant observation and psychological tests are applicable only to living subjects; interviewing the dead is difficult. There are of course in American society today many groups to which such methods can be applied—some large like the Mormons, some small like the Amish. And in fact since anthropologists began to run out of "primitives," there have been a number of anthropological studies of specific groups in contemporary American society.²⁷ Many of these are excellent. But they do not appear to be additive; rather than revealing any general American culture, they remain isolated studies.

If then one raises the question of what Miller and Hallowell have to offer as paradigms for American Studies, the real issue is whether we can go from the brilliant micro-analyses they did to some form of macro-analysis that will be, if not equally brilliant, at least more enlightening than what we have. I believe that

this can be done, but it cannot be done easily or quickly. What then might such a project look like?

Before trying to answer that question, there is one issue that needs to be clarified, since lack of clarity here renders vision impossible. It has often been claimed that the United States is a multicultural society; it is not. In the United States, there is one federal governmental system whose authority is universally accepted—accepted grudgingly perhaps by a few, but accepted nonetheless. There is one system of law, and one set of judicial institutions. There is one economic system that dominates the nation, whether one likes it or not. There is a national media system with trivial local variations. There is a single well understood class system, with again some minor variations. There is a dominant national education system with minor variations. There is one—and only one—military system. There is a startling uniformity of urban environments from city plans to house plans to yard plantings, with class-linked variations within the urban centers that are found almost uniformly in cities across the country. Where is the multiculturalism? True, there is variation in religion, but religious competition is part of the original plan defined by law and the religious variation, while sometimes striking, is not great. Unless one wants to define “culture” so broadly that eating pizza makes one Italian-American, there is little cultural variation in the United States, and most of what there is to be found among new immigrant groups not yet assimilated, which is exactly where one would expect to find it. United States culture is extraordinarily uniform and coercive, as foreigners are constantly complaining.

One can think of the institutional structure of our society as defining a maze of paths through which people move in the course of their lives in efforts to obtain the rewards the society offers. There are an enormous number of paths through the maze; to take an example we all know: preschool, elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, college, graduate school, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, retirement, death. Some paths connect; some do not; all involve multiple choice points which usually represent irreversible choices. Depending upon where you start, some paths are available and some are not; it is often the case that you cannot get there from here. Many factors condition where you start, which paths are open, and the degree of difficulty of getting from here to there. But everyone in the society goes through some set of paths; if you stay in the society, there is no other choice. Moreover, the maze is constantly changing, sometimes because people try to change it, usually in unplanned, uncontrollable, and largely unforeseen ways. This model is of course nothing new, but it can serve to orient what we do.

The maze model seems at first antithetical to the sorts of models created by Miller and Hallowell; the former seems purely individualistic, the latter group centered. But reflection shows that this impression is false. The maze—the institutional structure—exists only as a part of the world view.²⁸ Institutions, positions, roles, etc. are created by us and are real just in so far as the members of the

society believe them to be real. There are no physical entities corresponding to the positions or roles of doctor, lawyer or Indian chief; these are attributes that people have because members of the society think they have them. And different positions and roles exist in different societies. If Jesus had not been a Jew, he could not have tried out to be the messiah, because this position existed in no other society. In fact, a social structural orientation forms a sixth orientation of the world view that is universal.²⁹ To say that a society has a particular social structure is to say that its members share a certain complex set of beliefs. As lately noted, the uniformity of these beliefs in American society is striking and shows clearly that we are dealing with a single culture. But of course the sharing is not complete. Different groups within the society vary in the ways they conceive the maze or try to shape it. These variations are important differences, but they are differences *within* the culture, not differences *between* distinct cultures. And these various beliefs, taken as premises for action, account for much of the conflict and unrest in society.

It is often said that anthropology deals with culture and sociology with social interactions. But the distinction makes little sense. Social interactions are interactions among persons. Humans are indeed physical objects, but not all world views restrict personhood to humans; prayer is an example of a social interaction between a non-human person and a human one that is common in our society. Further, what is an interaction? As Geertz famously pointed out,³⁰ while a contraction of an eyelid is a physical event, a wink is a culturally constituted social interaction. One cannot make sense of social interactions or even define what they are apart from the belief systems of the society in question.

Further, individuals never run the maze alone. Not only does one's starting position depend upon one's origin-family and the groups to which one belongs but so does one's progress in the maze, at least through one's early years and often throughout. Social attributes of race, gender, birth, kinship, love and friendship constantly affect decision making, opportunity, and resources. The myth of the self-made man propagated by figures as different as Benjamin Franklin and Lyndon Johnson is just that—a myth. Indeed, Franklin's and Johnson's careers were largely shaped by their families of origin—a fact that both chose to obscure in order to make their life-paths appear to conform to a cultural ideal. Being a member of a particular group not only affects one's conception of the maze but affects both positively and negatively one's access to and progress in the maze. And it also affects what goals of the culture are found most attractive and most accessible. Not surprisingly therefore groups vie for access and advantage.

Moreover, every individual belongs to many different groups, and different group memberships provide different advantages in different situations. In the 1960s, for example, when identity politics became the rage, people who had ignored or depreciated their ethnic backgrounds before suddenly discovered the glories of being an ethnic, or a woman, or a gay, or whatever. Different group

memberships can affect different accesses to life-paths, and where one is blocked others may be preferred.

There is nothing new in any of the above. But the points I want to stress are that, as Miller and Hallowell so well understood, the world view defines the social behavioral environment as well as the natural behavioral environment (if indeed such a distinction can be drawn), that these beliefs taken as premises for action shape the ways in which people seek to obtain the goals offered by the culture, that the goals offered are the creation of the culture, and that the whole system must fit, to some tolerable degree, the psychological needs of the members of the society as well as the physical realities of the environment. However obvious this may be, it defines a research program that is all too often ignored by those who seem to think that American civilization is a random collection of dissident sets or a monolithic structure in which the few determine everything. Particularly regrettable is the failure to investigate and conceptualize the psychological factors that for example make it necessary for people to pretend that all success is purely an individual achievement that reflects moral worth, that whatever social roles one plays, there remains an invisible "inner self" independent of social "selves" but also curiously indefinable,³¹ or that "competitiveness" (i.e., "focused interpersonal aggression"³²) is so desirable. Until we are willing and able to examine such questions, we will never understand American civilization.

But how is all this to be done? It would be pointless to review here the problems posed by the lack of adequate historical data; everyone knows what they are and enough has been written about them to make any recital redundant. The question is what to do about those problems. We cannot create data where none exist, so we must find ways to extend the use of what we have. What this requires is that we turn theoretical, or at least more theoretical than we have usually been. Specifically, we need to create models or theories of the particular cultural processes or states in which we are interested. The data available for this purpose will be limited, partial and biased. But they will permit the creation of a model for some subjects; the problem will be in generalizing from these special cases to the broader population. Here what must be done is to draw connections from the model to data that can be obtained for the broader population. Confirmation of the applicability of the model to the wider domain will therefore be indirect. But it will be confirmation nonetheless and, barring the discovery of new data, it will be the best that we can do.

Suppose for example that we want to understand the use of abusive physical punishments such as whippings by Southern slaveholders. We are interested here not just in the frequency of such punishments but in the beliefs and motives that determined that frequency. We can of course go to journals of the slaveholders and plantation records, as Fogel and Engerman did,³³ but the number of such records that provide the sort of data we want is very limited and constitute nothing even vaguely resembling a random sample. And what the data provide at

best are a basis for estimates of the frequency of punishment, not the beliefs determining them. What do we do? I suggest that we try to construct a theory that will integrate the data that we do have. We may suppose that Southern slaveholders were capitalists who sought to maximize their profits. But the application of ordinary economic analysis to this problem is difficult because our standard economic theory assumes a free labor force and a wage system—something clearly false of slave plantations. Incentives of various sorts were used to encourage production on Southern plantations, but one cannot assume that these were the equivalent of wage incentives; obviously, force had to be applied to compel work. But there is a further factor here—slave resistance. It is reasonable to assume that beyond some point the greater the force applied through abusive punishment, the greater the resistance. And overcoming resistance would have cost money—money spent on supervision and enforcement, and lost due to injury to the slave or his confinement. It is not hard to see that these factors should determine a level of force applied that would yield the highest productivity at the least cost, and an optimal balance between punishment and reward. One could therefore construct such a model. Neither the beliefs and motives of the slaveholders nor the amount of slave resistance can be directly determined from the data. But if the model is right, then productivity should peak at a certain frequency of abusive punishment and level of reward, and decline when the level of both either exceeds or falls below that point. Clearly data from plantation records that will allow determination of these quantities will be scarce and the plantations for which such data exist will bear no systematic relation to the population of plantations. But if the model does integrate these data well, we can consider it to be confirmed to some degree, at least for now, if not, not.

This sort of model building and indirect testing is not popular with humanists; historians in particular are conservative empiricists who want “just the facts.” But where the facts are not directly revealed in the data, this sort of indirect approach must be used. We can take some comfort from the fact that postulation and indirect confirmation are standard procedures of the harder sciences, though our inability to obtain probability samples from past populations in the usual case must force us to rely upon qualitative judgments of the degree of integration the model brings to the data we can find. Nevertheless, such methods of indirect testing can be used, and they offer the only way currently available to determine the degree to which models such as Miller’s Puritans, Welter’s True Womanhood,³⁴ and Hays’s Progressives³⁵ are applicable to wider populations.

The past thirty years have seen a proliferation of very particular studies of very particular groups in American society. As noted, these studies are not additive; they do not simply add up to American civilization. But these groups are all involved, one way or another, in the maze system, and such studies provide data that could be integrated by broader ranging and more comprehensive theories. Where those theories will come from no one knows. But perhaps among the ranks of the shamefully underpaid young Ph.D.s now struggling to survive

American "prosperity," there is a young scholar who will do for American civilization as a whole what Perry Miller did for New England Puritans.

Notes

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4. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College In The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1936), 2 vols.
5. John Higham, "The Rise of American Intellectual History" *American Historical Review* 56:453-471 (April 1951). John Higham, "American Intellectual History: A Critical Appraisal" *American Quarterly* 13:219-233 (Summer 1961).
6. Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, 1956).
7. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943).
8. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (Philadelphia, 1945).
9. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948).
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11. Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1933), xi.
12. Perry Miller, *Errand Into The Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1956), 1.
13. Ludwig Lewisohn, *Expression In America* (New York, 1932).
14. Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards, Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York, 1966), 66.
15. Cotton Mather, *Diary* (New York: Frederick Ungar, n.d.), I, 237.
16. David Hall, "On Common Ground: The Coherence of American Puritan Studies" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 44:193-229 (April 1987), provides a review of this debate.
17. Miller, *New England Mind: Seventeenth Century*, vii.
18. George Selement, "Perry Miller: A Note on His Sources in *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 31:453-464 (July 1974).
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20. James Hoopes, "Introduction" in *Sources for the New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, ed. Hoopes (Williamsburg, 1981).
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22. *Ibid.*
23. Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca, 1953).
24. A. I. Hallowell, "The Self and its Behavioral Environment," *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia, 1955), 75-110.
25. Hallowell, *Culture and Experience*.
26. Perry Miller, "Religion and Society In The Early Literature of Virginia," *Errand Into The Wilderness*, 99-140.
27. Cf. James Spradley *The Cocktail Waitress* (New York, 1974). James Spradley, *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* (Boston, 1970). James Spradley and Michael Rynkiewich, eds. *Nacirema* (Boston, 1975).
28. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1967).
29. Hallowell intended the object orientation to include this.
30. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 6.
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32. George Spindler, *Sociocultural and Psychological Processes in Menomini Acculturation* (Berkeley, 1955), 174.
33. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974).
34. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18:131-175 (Summer 1966).
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