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## American Culture and Modernity: A Twice-Told Tale

### I.

One can think of the take off – phase of American Studies in the post-World War II years in terms of roads taken and not taken. When the pioneers of the American Studies movement tried to develop an argument that would convince a hostile academic world of the need to study American literature and culture, they basically had two choices. One was to claim that American literature and culture merited special scholarly attention because, in contrast to the elitism of European culture, it could be seen as manifestation of a democratic culture. For this argument, scholars such as Constance Rourke had paved the way in the 1930s. Against those European as well as American critics who considered American culture inferior and who asked, often in exasperation, whether and when an authentic, specifically American culture would finally emerge, Rourke answered that it had been there all the time, but that critics, in their erroneous equation of the idea of culture with European high culture, had failed to take any note of it.<sup>1</sup> In order to make up for this oversight, she focused on a vernacular tradition in American culture, ranging from Davy Crockett to Mark Twain and even Henry James – a vision of American culture as democratic expression of the common man that is still echoed in the central role which the term vernacular culture played in the work of critics like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx in the Fifties.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Constance Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee*. New York: Harcourt, 1927; *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1931; *Davy Crockett*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934; *Charles Sheeler. Artist in the American Tradition*. New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1938; *The Roots of American Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942. – For a helpful discussion of Rourke's approach see Arthur F. Wertheim, "Constance Rourke and the Discovery of American Culture in the 1930s," *The Study of American Culture: Contemporary Conflicts*, ed. Luther S. Luedtke. Deland, FLA.: Everett Edwards, 1977, 49–61. – *Partisan Review's* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture" in 1952 indicates that hostile attitudes toward American culture were changing among American intellectuals in the post-War years but positive references are mostly to recent developments. In academic life, and particularly in English Departments, a condescending view prevailed throughout the Fifties and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> See Leo Marx, "The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature," *Die Neueren Sprachen* 3 (1958), 46–57; repr. in *The Pilot and the Passenger. Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States*. New York: Oxford UP, 1960, 117.

However, the vernacular culture-concept was eventually displaced by another line of argument which may be called the American Renaissance-argument. This approach focused on a body of American authors of the Romantic period which F.O. Matthiessen, who was a teacher both of Smith and Marx at Harvard, had put at the center of American literature in his study *American Renaissance*.<sup>3</sup> The shift from vernacular culture to American Romanticism initiated by Matthiessen's study raises the interesting question why the writers of the American Renaissance were considered more useful for the academic legitimization of American literature studies than the vernacular tradition. I can think of two reasons. One is that the vernacular tradition, in its often crude irreverence, was not a very sophisticated form of culture and hence, perhaps with the exception of Twain, not very well suited to counter the reservations of skeptical Ivy League English-departments. The standards of cultural achievement and aesthetic value that had gained dominance after World War II in academia were those of formalism and aesthetic modernism, and vernacular culture of the Rourke-kind fell terribly short of those standards. You probably have to live in a small town, as Rourke did, to counter high brow reservations about American culture with Davy Crockett.

The American Renaissance writers, on the other hand, were far better suited to meet the aesthetic criteria derived from modernism. At least this is true if one reads them from the point of view which D.H. Lawrence had introduced into the study of American literature in his book *Studies in Classic American Literature*, first published in 1923. In his brief foreword, Lawrence turned all conventional wisdom about American literature and culture on its head by arguing that some American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are really the most radical of modern writers, true moderns *avant la lettre*. His daring claim is worth to be quoted at length, because, unwittingly, it provided a key argument for post World War II American Studies:

Two bodies of modern literature seem to me to have come to a real verge: the Russian and the American. Russian and American. And by American I do not mean Sherwood Anderson, who is so Russian. I mean the old people, little thin volumes of Hawthorne, Poe, Dana, Melville, Whitman. These seem to me to have reached a verge, as the more voluminous Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, Chekhov reached a limit on the other side. The furthest frenzies of French modernism or futurism have not yet

Nash Smith's book *Mark Twain. The Development of a Writer*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1962. – For a discussion of the importance of the concept of the vernacular for a theory of American literature see the study by Sieglinde Lemke, *The Enigma of the Vernacular: The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature*. Habilitationsschrift Berlin: Freie Universität 2002, to be published.

<sup>3</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson*

reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman reached. The European moderns are all *trying* to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it. Which is why the world has funk'd them, and funk's them to-day. The great difference between the extreme Russians and the extreme Americans lies in the fact that the Russians are explicit and hate eloquence and symbols, seeing in these only subterfuge, whereas the Americans refuse everything explicit and always put up a sort of double meaning.<sup>4</sup> (viii)

Lawrence's argument is ingenious. What he manages to do with it is to redefine an American literature long considered provincial as modern literature in the sense of a literature of negation. This claim depends on the premise of a double structure, and in effect, in retrospect, one may argue that almost all major works in the myth and symbol tradition of American Studies are based on this methodological premise.<sup>5</sup> In each case, the interpretation of American literature and culture aims at the recovery of a covert level of meaning that undermines the surface level in a stance of negation, reenacting Melville's famous "No! in Thunder" in defiance of a naively and uncritically optimistic view of "America." Seen this way, what Lawrence calls classic American literature becomes almost an allegory of critical theories of modernity: One level, the narrative surface, reflects, in its bland optimism and lack of a critical perspective, the instrumentalization of reason in modernity, while a second, underlying level of meaning provides a resource – in fact, the only remaining resource – for negating this reductionist version of progress. The often forced ways in which this negating potential was established in interpretation by the myth and symbol school can then be seen as an almost willful act of resignification, saying in fact: If we want to make a strong case for the study of American literature, then we have to find a way to describe it, not as democratic culture but as modern culture, that is, as an art of negation. The case is never made with reference to critical theories of modernity but the basic figure of thought bears strikingly similarity to such theories in its focus on the struggle between an "official" concept of modernity, defined as "progress," and an adversarial counter-tradition. As Leo Marx puts it in the afterword to a recent reedition of *The Machine in the Garden*: "Nevertheless, *The Machine in the Garden* emphasizes a fundamental divide in American culture and society. It separates the popular affirmation of industrial progress disseminated by spokesmen for the dominant economic and political elites, and the disaffected, often adversarial

<sup>4</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York: Seltzer, 1923, repr. New York: Viking Press, 1964, viii.

<sup>5</sup> On the central role of the idea of a double structure in the study of American literature, see my analysis in "Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der *American Studies*," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 18 (1973), 110–129 and in *Theorien amerikanischer Lit-*

viewpoint of a minority of political radicals, writers, artists, clergymen, and independent intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

It has become customary to discuss the myth and symbol school in the context of consensus history and the Cold War of the 1950s, and insofar as the myth and symbol school tried to develop an argument that would make American culture look more respectable and thus support the hegemonial claims of the new international power against communism, it was indeed part of that development, although, I take it, an inadvertent, even unwilling one. However, the perspective that provides the best explanation for the typical choices in texts and interpretive method which were made at this stage of American Studies is that of aesthetic modernism with its belief in the saving powers of an aesthetics of negation. To be sure, critics like Smith or Marx were anything but formalists. Their project was, as Marx puts it in his "Afterword," to reconcile political and aesthetic preferences. (370) They are thus "modernists," not in a narrow formalist sense, but in the sense of a broader sociological and political perspective. For although they never discussed the issue on the level of critical theory, their search for a literature of negation only makes sense in the context of a particular view of modernity and America's place in it. This view of modernity is deeply indebted to a European philosophical tradition culminating in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: It is the modernity of increasing rationalization and, as a consequence, the alienation of human beings from their own authentic selves. Only forms of culture that resist the pressures of this historical process of rationalization and the instrumentalization of reason can provide resources for the possibility of overcoming this self-alienation. This, and not, as many Cultural Studies representatives mistakenly argue today, an undemocratic elitism is the reason for the central role high art played in American Studies at this time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Leo Marx, "Afterword," *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford UP, p. 383.

<sup>7</sup> It also explains the openly hostile attitude toward American popular culture in that generation, which, in taking another cue from critical theories of modernity, was rejected as "mass culture." This rejection created a problem, however, with regards to a third strategy of legitimation, that of presenting American Studies as a new, interdisciplinary method of cultural analysis focusing on American culture as a whole. The first attacks on the myth and symbol school within American Studies therefore were methodological and not political, focusing on the apparent contradiction of an approach that claims to study American culture comprehensively and yet continues to regard high art as key document for an understanding of this culture. This challenge led to a crisis of self-definition and, eventually, to a shift in legitimation from modernist to methodological arguments. The debate – and what is at stake in it – is well summarized in Leo Marx's essay "American Studies – A Defense of an Unscientific Method," *New Literary History* 1 (1969): 75–90 which, despite the methodological emphasis of its title, is really a

The myth and symbol school's tacit reliance on a critical theory of modernity implies a particular view of American society and the role culture is supposed to play in it. In the vernacular culture-argument, America is a pioneer country of democracy and hence of modernization, of a process of cultural dehierarchization that is far ahead of European developments. In the American Renaissance-argument, the underlying view of America is that of a materialistic civilization, comprising the worst tendencies of modernity, and therefore only an art of negation can provide a meaningful cultural response. *Virgin Land*, the founding text of American Studies, is on the way from the vernacular tradition to a reconceptualization of literature as myth, but it was the next generation of critics such as Charles Feidelson, R.W. B. Lewis, Richard Chase, Harry Levin, Leslie Fiedler, Leo Marx and Richard Poirier who moved the study of American literature from the vernacular to the modernist negation-paradigm.<sup>8</sup>

This was the beginning of (or, more precisely, the return to) an oppositional tradition that drew on American literature and culture in order to criticize American society as a civilization governed by shallow visions of progress and material success. The subsequent development of the field has been analyzed and discussed many times by now. I am interested in it here only with regards to its changing views of the relation between American literature and modernity. The main theoretical thrust of the revisionism ushered in by Sacvan Bercovitch's and Myra Jehlen's essay collection *Ideology and Classic American Literature* is to undermine claims for the possibility of negation: In the final analysis, they argue, dissent is really part of a ritual of consensus and, thus, coopted by the idea of "America" – which, in the context of our argument, can be seen as equivalent of the instrumental rationality of modernity from which there is no longer any escape.<sup>9</sup> The different

<sup>8</sup> Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953; R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam. Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth-Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955; Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957; Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness. Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1958; Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 1960; rev. ed. New York: Dell, 1967; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1964.; Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere. The Place of Style in American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966. – For a helpful discussion of the impact of D.H. Lawrence on American literary studies see Michael J. Colacurcio, "The Symbolic and the Symptomatic: D.H. Lawrence in Recent American Criticism," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 486–501.

<sup>9</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds. *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1986. – As Thomas Claviez has pointed out, it is striking how close the position of Bercovitch is to that of Herbert Marcuse who was his col-

camps in the revisionism that emerged with Bercovitch's and Jehlen's reconceptualization of myth and symbol as ideology stand for various stages in the radicalization of this argument: In marketplace criticism, the market, for critical theory source and symbol of the alienating effects of capitalism, has also begun to invade the works of American Renaissance- and other high-brow writers;<sup>10</sup> in New Historicism, the point is no longer, as it still is in marketplace criticism, that even the writers of the American Renaissance or writers like Henry James could not escape the instrumental rationality of modernity, but that these writers, because of the power of their works, actually are especially effective agents of the system and hence complicit with it.<sup>11</sup> This line of argument is further radicalized in the book *Cultures of United States Imperialism* by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, and in Race and Gender studies, which insist that the works of classic American literature are pervaded by imperialism, racism, and sexism. Moreover, their presence in the text is not a remnant of past prejudices, but actually constitutes the text's meaning, even where these texts do not explicitly deal with issues of race, gender, or empire.<sup>12</sup> In order to identify this constitutive role of sexism, racism or imperialism, one therefore has to go to a deeper, covert level of the text. Critics working within Race and Gender studies, the imperialism-paradigm, and postcolonial studies thus reintroduce the idea of two lev-

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Criticism in Sacvan Bercovitch and Herbert Marcuse," *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 11 (1995), 173–203.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., for example, Jean Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880–1980*, eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears. New York: Pantheon, 1983, 67–100; Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985; Michael Anesko, 'Friction with the Market': *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984 and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. – Henry James became a favorite target for marketplace criticism and New Historicism for the reasons mentioned in Ruth Bernard Yeazell's review of two books on James by Freedman and Posnock: "Both writers strenuously resist any attempt to understand the artist as somehow transcending the forces of his culture, a mystifying move that they identify with the triumph of high modernism." "Demystifying the Master," *American Literary History* 5 (1993), 315.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1993. – Probably the best known argument for the constitutive role of race even for white American culture is made by Toni Morrison in her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. – For an analysis of this approach see my essay "Die Wissenschaft vom systemischen Effekt. Von der Counter-Culture zu den Race, Class, and Gender Studies," *Der Geist der Unruhe. 1968 im Vergleich*, eds. Rainer Rosenberg et al. Berlin: Akademie Vg., 2002, 111–124.

els of meaning but invert it: While in the myth and symbol school the double meaning of the text opens up the possibility of negation, it now reveals exactly the opposite, namely the illusionary nature of any hope for negation. In effect, the real horror lurks on the covert level, the former site of opposition, where things are worse than on the surface. Thus, the true extent of how deeply and comprehensively even an apparent art of negation is infected by the instrumental rationality of modernity is finally unmasked.

This radical critique of an aesthetics of negation reflects the radicalized view of modernity in race and gender studies and postcolonial studies, illustrated, for example, by Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism*, where colonialism informs – in effect constitutes – the work even of authors like Jane Austen, who consider themselves far removed from the world and work of colonization.<sup>13</sup> One consequence of the development I have traced is a gradual extension of the meaning of the word modernity. In aesthetic modernism, there are still two alternative modernities, the modernity of instrumental rationality and its negation in art. Now there is only one modernity and it is all-encompassing in its reach. In aesthetic modernism's version of modernity, there are conformists and non-conforming nay-sayers; now, even the nay-sayers are not only complicit but, in effect, colonizers in their own subtle, cunning, and often powerful ways. Phenomena like racism are no longer the dark underside of modernity but describe its very nature. They are, in effect, inseparable from modernity.<sup>14</sup> With this view of modernity we seem to have reached a point of no return at which the concept appears to lose any analytical usefulness, unless we want to find a term that would allow us to claim that the domination of Western ideology and power is systemic and all-pervasive.

## II.

However, as my title "American Culture and Modernity: A Twice-Told Tale" indicates, I want to suggest that the relation between American culture and modernity can also be described from another angle and in another way.<sup>15</sup> For this, it is helpful to start from a basic methodological considera-

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Lawrence Grossberg who, almost in passing, speaks of "the various forms of modern power, including those of colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, disciplinization, and normalization." "Cultural Studies in/and New Worlds," *Essays on Cultural Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997, 354.

<sup>15</sup> The following section draws on parts of my essay "The Modernity of America and the Practice of Scholarship," *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002, 212–214.

tion. When we interpret literature and culture in general and American literature and culture in particular, we have to base our interpretations, explicitly or implicitly, on an assumption of the text's significance and representativeness. For whom does the text speak, whom is it representing? The usefulness of a historical study or cultural analysis will depend on the insight the cultural material can provide beyond itself. To interpret a cock fight in Bali is only of interest, if the interpretation goes beyond the mere physicality of the act itself and manages to bring forth some helpful insights into the culture or society under study.

Debates in American Studies have therefore, from the start, focused on the question of what objects and texts would provide the best insight into American society and culture. In the beginning, American Studies followed the tradition of intellectual history and literary history and based its interpretations of what it called "the American experience" on the assumption that major artistic and intellectual achievements provided a condensed insight into the inner nature of "America." Scholars such as Perry Miller or F.O. Matthiessen concentrated on such achievements because they looked for profound expressions of American culture. For this approach, a key document in the history of ideas or a distinguished work of art became the embodiment of the true meaning of American civilization. The main objection against this approach initially came from sociological studies of American culture and, specifically, from studies of popular culture and the media. American Studies was criticized for interpreting material as representative that did not speak for the majority of Americans. The answer to this challenge was provided by the categories of myth and symbol through which an individual text could be described as manifestation of a widely shared cultural pattern and yet, at the same time, also be interpreted as a significant expression of subjective experience. Fittingly, Henry Nash Smith defined myth as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image."<sup>16</sup>

However, the claims of the myth and symbol school in American Studies were undermined in the 1970s by the new social history which questioned the representativeness of the kind of American myth analyzed in studies like *Virgin Land* and replaced it with a more complex model of different social groups and subcultures that stand in varying and changing relations to society's dominant myths.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the claims of the myth and sym-

<sup>16</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*: Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1950, VII.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., for example, Laurence Veysey's exemplary critique of the "lack of precision" in *Virgin Land* which is, at a closer look, really a doubt about the representativeness of Smith's material: "Another classic instance of this lack of precision is found in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, where for long stretches we are not sure whether rivers

bol school were also undermined from within intellectual and cultural studies by a politicization in which American myths were redefined as disguised and therefore especially effective forms of ideological incorporation.<sup>18</sup> After these challenges from the outside and inside, it was no longer possible to regard any particular myth or symbol as expression of *the* American experience. On the contrary, one had to assume that these "American" myths and symbols were designed to claim a false national representativeness while, in effect, ignoring or symbolically eliding alternative groups and traditions that had to be unearthed from underneath the official self-definitions of American culture. In this revisionist stage of American Studies, what was "truly" representative were the cultural manifestations of oppressed groups and oppositional movements.

One such movement was the women's movement. However, no sooner had its perspective, together with that of other groups, begun to influence and shape work in American Studies, it was, in turn, criticized for its unwarranted generalizations and unacknowledged forms of essentialism. One point of this charge of "essentialism" was that an identity construction as "woman," based exclusively on the fact of sexual difference, is not considered adequate for capturing the whole range of female experience. Instead, it imprisons women in a cultural fiction of sexual identity. To work against this trap, the category of gender was introduced in order to emphasize the cultural constructedness of sexual identities. Identity is thus discursively ascribed and not determined by biology, but even such a "liberation" from a biological fate still traps the female individual in a binary scheme. Hence, the next stage in feminist debates leads to the idea of "performed gender" in which gender is part of an open, mobile staging of identity and any claim for group representativeness is thus radically dissolved. To analyze a text or person in terms of the performance of gender can thus, in the final analysis, no longer provide any insight beyond itself. The individual has liberated herself from the iron grip of group identities, but this achievement can only illustrate her own potential for resignification. Consequently, interpretations in American Studies become a form of individual empowerment. In this, they ironically come close to the unique creative performance of the

thought patterns are being attributed to all Americans, to Westerners, to Easterners thinking about the West (as Smith insisted was the case in a letter to me many years ago), or, what is more believable, to second-rate novelists and poets." "Intellectual History and the New Social History," *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, eds. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin: Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979, 21.

<sup>18</sup> See the argument by Richard Slotkin who in his influential study *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*: Middletown, CN: Wesleyan UP, 1973 traces America's present-day politics in Vietnam and else-

work of art from which early American Studies set out – with the one major difference that the performing individual herself has now become the “work of art.” The claims for individuality originally reserved for special artistic achievements have now been democratized. The history of American Studies provides a fascinating story of individualization.

In the intellectual history of a Perry Miller, women – unless their name was Anne Hutchinson or Anne Bradstreet – do not have a voice of their own. The clerical elite speaks for them. In principle, the same applies to the myth and symbol school, although there is the hint of at least an indirect representation, since the relevant works express deeper needs of all members of society. A myth is no longer restricted to an elite. However, the new social history and women’s studies went one step further and discarded the “universalism” of traditional intellectual history and the myth and symbol school. Women gained a voice of their own – at this point, however, only insofar as their fate is representative for the state of women in general. A domestic novel, for example, can merit attention as example of the ideological limits or subversive possibilities of the cult of domesticity which, in turn, is taken as a symbol for the situation of women under patriarchy. The subsequent development in feminist scholarship, however, is characterized by ever intensifying debates about how representative such material really is as an expression of female experience. Black women do not feel represented, lesbians seek to retreat from a biological definition or from a mere male-female binarism. As a result, the development in American Studies has had an unmistakable trajectory: General claims have been undermined by more and more detailed and differentiated studies of particular groups which, in turn, are then questioned for their unexamined “universalist” or “essentialist” assumptions. Ultimately, the individual can only represent herself.<sup>19</sup>

For some time, the return of the category of ethnicity seemed to open the way for an acknowledgement of both identity and difference, but ethnicity, too, is now dissolved into radical heterogeneity, because any “stable” identification of an ethnic identity would do injustice to the individual members of that group. Thus, to give but one example, Lisa Lowe in her book *Immigrant Acts* tries to provide a sense of the far-ranging heterogeneity of Asian-American identities when she says:

...Asian Americans have certainly been constructed as different, and as other than white Americans of European origin. But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are extremely different and diverse among ourselves: as men and women

<sup>19</sup> In his summary of a lecture by Jacques Revel, Thomas Bender’s Report on Conference III of the *Project of Internationalizing the Study of American History* (1999), provides a neat formulation for this trend: “History is no longer the grand tradition, the reign of Louis XIV but rather 20 million Frenchmen in the era of Louis XIV.”

at different distances and generations from our ‘original’ Asian cultures – cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Thai, or Cambodian – Asian Americans are born in the United States and born in Asia, of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race, urban and rural, refugee and nonrefugee, fluent in English and non-English-speaking, professionally trained and working-class. As with other immigrant groups in the United States, the Asian-origin collectivity is unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification with and relation to a ‘homeland,’ and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from ‘majority culture’ in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Lowe’s argument for an ethnic diversity of almost incalculable variety illustrates a move from identity politics to a new cultural politics of difference. Again, this move follows a logic of individualization: No matter whether critics focus on matters of subjection, subject-positioning or a patchwork of identities, they are always centrally concerned with identifying those last barriers that still stand in the way of a full recognition and acceptance of individual members of a particular group. This search, however, is the drama of modernity. To make this case, Tocqueville is more helpful than other theoreticians of modernity.<sup>21</sup> For in contrast to thinkers like Max Weber or Habermas, Tocqueville does not put reason or the iron cage of rationality at the center of his understanding of modernity, but democracy – a democracy, however, defined not as an egalitarian ideal of equality and justice but as a way of life in which the elimination of the institutionalized hierarchies of aristocratic society create the specifically modern drama of an inherently unstable identity that is no longer grounded in clear-cut, immovable social hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> In consequence, the individual has to find ways to establish new sources of recognition and self-esteem. One result is a constant search for attention. Central aspects of modernity such as the disenchantment of

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Garden City, N.Y., 1969. I am referring specifically to the second volume. There is a tendency in current revisionism to dismiss Tocqueville in passing, with no actual discussion, because of the claim that his sources of information were mostly conservative. However, the perceptiveness of Tocqueville’s analysis vastly exceeds the conservatism of his informants, because he is not primarily interested in democracy as a moral ideal but as a whole way of life, that is, as a cultural practice which affects and transforms all spheres of life.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the elaboration by Amy Gutman: “In the ancien régime, when a minority could count on being honored (as “Ladies” and “Lords”) and the majority could not realistically aspire to public recognition, the demand for recognition was unnecessary for the few and futile for the many. Only with the collapse of stable social hierarchies does the demand for public recognition become commonplace, along with the idea of the dignity of all individuals. Everyone is an equal – a Mr., Miss, Mrs., or Ms. – and we all expect to be recognized as such.” “Introduction,” Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994, p. 1.

the world, the loss of traditional authority, the growth of mobility, and the increase of our encounters with strangers brought about by modernization intensify this need for new sources of identity and self-esteem.

Marshall Berman has put these developments in the larger context of the culture of modernity. In his book on cultural modernity, with the fitting title *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, taken from Karl Marx, Berman focuses on the promise of individual self-realization established by the culture of modernity and, linked with it, the unlimited dynamic of self-development unleashed by modernity.<sup>23</sup> Modernity introduces a promise of individual self-realization and self-development that provides the drive for distinction and recognition, diagnosed by Tocqueville, with its own logic of acceleration. A restless individualism, as Berman calls it, throws all culture into a constant flux. All sources of authorization or self-legitimation are subject to constant change. As a consequence, this restless individualism constantly seeks forms that would provide distinction from the mass of others. As a result, "difference" becomes a primary source of recognition and self-esteem.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1982. – John Tomlinson stresses the importance of Berman for cultural analysis by arguing that he has managed to liberate the term modernity from its almost automatic equation with modernization theories: "The problem for cultural analysis is that the modernisation theorists have tarred all theories of cultural modernity with their brush and so there has been a reluctance amongst radical theorists, until quite recently, to speak of development and modernity in the same breath." *Cultural Imperialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gilmore draws attention to the fact that racism provides another source for seemingly "natural" distinctions among "equals." On this point, Gilmore argues convincingly, Tocqueville's analysis should be complemented by that of his fellow Frenchman and travel companion Gustave de Beaumont who realized that white equality is authorized and stabilized by racial exclusion: "Another interpretation of the 'tyranny of the majority' was proposed by Tocqueville's fellow traveller, Gustave de Beaumont. A student of customs rather than democratic institutions, Beaumont does not write of the republic as an ominous preview of Europe's future. On the contrary, he sees a nation mired in backward-looking attitudes that stem from the prevalence of a condition the opposite of Tocqueville's: inequality. In *Marie; or, Slavery in the United States* (1835), Beaumont focuses on race, and he claims that racial prejudice has effectively reinstated the European class system. He does not dispute his friend's insight about Americans all being alike; 'there is only one class' (p. 21) he admits, but its membership is restricted. Beaumont's study is truly the companion piece to *Democracy in America*: the two works leave no doubt that the dictatorship of race is rooted in the soil of white equivalence." *Surface and Depth. The Quest for Legibility in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003, p. 52. Gilmore's argument allows us to reintroduce racism or sexism into a discussion of modernity; however, not as constitutive element but as a paradoxical consequence of processes of cultural dehierarchization and individualization.

As Tocqueville has pointed out, democracy complicates and intensifies this search. Because the link to a chain of family tradition, characteristic of aristocratic societies, is broken and a person's worth is no longer automatically established by her social position, the individual becomes responsible for establishing his or her own worth in the eyes of others. This task, however, is complicated in view of the fact that under the premise of equality, all others pursue the same task, so that the challenge is to find a way of distinguishing oneself from all the others. Tocqueville, in fact, attributes the strong elements of performance in American culture, the striking persistence of theatrical or, as he calls it, a "bombastic" style of communication that draws attention to itself, to this challenge. The strong tendencies in recent American Studies for overstatement and originality, exemplified, for example, by the New Historicism of the Walter Benn Michaels school, can be seen as a modern manifestation of this same tendency. More generally speaking, the major consequence of the development Tocqueville anticipated so perceptively is that difference develops into a key value for cultural recognition.

### III.

The two tales I have told could hardly be more different. They seem to go in entirely different directions: One is a tale of modernity that goes from bad to worse, from a struggle between conflicting tendencies to an all-encompassing subjection, the other describes a modernity driven by a restless individualism that leads to ever wider and ever more individualized claims for attention and recognition. The striking contrast can be gauged in the changing meaning and fortunes of the idea of the aesthetic: In the American Renaissance-argument, the aesthetic dimension is still the saving grace, the basis for the possibility of negation; in ideological criticism of the Bercovitch-kind and in marketplace criticism, the aesthetic is already invaded by the system but still struggles, albeit often in a losing fight, with the encroaching forces of the market. Hence, the artist constantly has to fight against the temptation of "selling out." In New Historicism, the aesthetic has become not only another, but an especially subtle power effect, while in Race and Gender Studies it contributes to the effective construction of a subject position. At the same time, however, aesthetic acts such as performance or articulation have become increasingly important for the authorization of individual claims for recognition. Thus, on the one hand, aesthetics has become the main target for an increasingly radical critique of the possibility of negation in modern societies; on the other hand, this has created a need for new forms of authorization and has led to a redefinition of

the aesthetic as any kind of powerful performance. Paradoxically, the end of modernist aesthetics and the radical cultural dehierarchization coming along with it, has thus opened the door for a potential pan-aestheticization of everyday life.

Which one of these two tales of modernity tells the more convincing story about American culture? The question is not just an academic one, because the United States have always been regarded as *the* modern country par excellence. Hence, the view of what kind of modernity informs American culture will also shape our view and assessment of "America." Do we have to take a choice between the two versions? The political scientist Shmuel Eisenstadt has drawn our attention to the fact that there is not just one modernity but that there are multiple modernities, while in an essay in the journal *Public Culture*, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar has reminded us of the concept of "alternative modernities" in order to analytically revive, but also to revise, the dichotomy between instrumental rationality and a cultural modernity of dissent. His solution, however, only reenacts the logic I have traced: A strict dichotomy can no longer be maintained because "alternative modernities produce combinations and recombinations that are endlessly surprising."<sup>25</sup> Everything is in flux. Berman is confirmed, but not explained.

There is another possibility, however, to discuss the question of what version of modernity is the more convincing one, namely to claim that one of these modernities constitutes the other. From a Foucauldian perspective, for example, one can argue that individualization is an effect of power and knowledge. Typically, John Fiske writes: "Individuation is a power process which separates an individual from others for the purposes of documentation, evaluation and control. (...) Individuation produces an individuality that exists only in the data banks of the power-bloc."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, one may argue that modernity cannot be reduced to the totalizing vision of Foucault and other representatives of cultural radicalism, because, as a complex, differentiated system, modernity also contains the possibility for self-correction and unforeseen emergence. Individualization can only be thought of as "subjection" if, at least theoretically, a non-subjected individual is set as reference and norm, for otherwise subjection could not be conceptualized as such. I would go even one step further: If the process of indi-

<sup>25</sup> Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities", *Public Culture* 11 (1999), 18. For other versions of the idea of multiple modernities see the issue of the journal *Daedalus* entitled "Multiple Modernities," 129 (2000); S.N. Eisenstadt, *Die Vielfalt der Moderne*. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2000; Scott Lasch, *Another Modernity. A Different Rationality*. London: Blackwell, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> John Fiske, *Power Plays: Power Works*. London: Verso, 1993, p. 67.

vidualization is driven by a need for recognition and self-esteem, then a description of the American system as a totalizing system can be seen as a rhetorical device that can lend special authority to individual claims for critical insight and can thus function as a form of individual self-empowerment. Although on the surface, this rhetoric rejects the idea of individualization, it can actually be a strategy in its service.

This is the argument I want to make. What we can learn from my twice-told tale is that even those who make a case for the recognition of their cultural identity by arguing that they are the victims of modernity, a modernity driven by an all-consuming logic of instrumental rationality, re-enact a typical pattern of modernity. At least this can be claimed once we dissociate our definition of modernity from traditional concepts such as the Enlightenment, secularization, rationalization, or industrialization to a view of modernity as the relentless pursuit of a search for recognition, a search that is intensified by democracy as a way of life in which entirely new problems of identity and self-esteem are created. From this point of view, Race and Gender studies, border theory and transnational American Studies are not manifestations of a contra-modernity that has finally found a way to escape the iron cage of the system, as their proponents would like to believe. Instead, they present another radical stage in the process of individualization ushered in and constantly accelerated by modernity. This is not meant as an accusation, for example by pinning the label individualism with all its negative connotations of selfishness on the new social movements.<sup>27</sup> One aspect that has prevented us from grasping the full meaning of American modernity is the conflation of the terms individualization and individualism: Individualism describes a liberal philosophy of individual autonomy and self-determination which can hardly be maintained in view of recent cultural theory and its emphasis on the cultural constructedness of identities. In contrast, the concept of individualization refers to an increasing dissociation from the authority of social and cultural claims and hence to a pluralization of life-styles that can range from religious fundamentalism to anarchic libertarians. In effect, the patchwork identities that play such an

<sup>27</sup> Even if one distinguishes between individualism and individualization, it may still appear counter-intuitive to argue that the new social movements of the 60's have strengthened individualization. To be sure, their original struggle was one for civil rights. Since then, however, the question has shifted to questions of cultural recognition. Such recognition is a first step in the process of individualization because it liberates the individual from racial or sexual stereotyping and therefore promises to open the gate for a recognition of the individual personality. Once this first goal of group recognition is secured, the second stage in the process of individualization sets in which I have described here with regards to the women's movement, that of an inner differentiation and dissociation from group identities.



important role in Race and Gender studies can be seen as an advanced cultural manifestation of this pluralization of life-styles. Correspondingly, Race and Gender studies can be seen as manifestation of an advanced stage of individualization.

The radical critique of modernity which informs current cultural studies in general, and American Studies in particular, is thus, ironically enough, an expression of that very same modernity. Why is that an interesting claim? First of all, because a revised understanding of modernity can help us to explain the theoretical conflict between an analysis of systemic imprisonment and an ever accelerating attack on remaining barriers to a recognition of difference. This still leaves open the question, however, what the usefulness of such a revised view of modernity could be for American Studies. The question is relevant because an American Studies built on the idea of a national identity appears no longer acceptable. What are the alternatives? Border theory and transnational studies? As long as these new approaches merely look for a position outside of American culture in order to solve the Bercovitch-problem, namely the pervasive cooptive powers of the American consensus, these approaches remain within the process of individualization.<sup>28</sup> If we want to understand the amazing pull and hold American society still has on the imagination world-wide, we have to find a way to acknowledge and analyze this process, not merely to reenact it.

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<sup>28</sup> See my essay "Internationalizing American Studies," *European Journal of American*

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