

Introduction

American Studies is a joint, interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States. In this sense, work in American Studies, no matter whether it addresses the issue explicitly or not, is always grounded in a set of underlying constitutive views of American culture that are confirmed or challenged by new findings. Although such often tacit assumptions may not be systematically developed, one may nevertheless classify them as theories, since – inevitably – they imply generalizations about “America” or the meaning of American history that have a systematic dimension, no matter whether this dimension is fully worked out or not.

In the first stage of academic American Studies, dominated by the myth and symbol school and the consensus historians, this issue of “the meaning of America” stood at the center of the self-definition of the field. The revisionist scholarship in American Studies, which emerged in the 1970s in the critique of the myth and symbol school and consensus history,¹ has challenged this “myth-discourse” about the meaning of America on at least four counts:

- 1) In terms of cultural analysis, the theories of American culture put forward by the myth and symbol school and the consensus historians are criticized as holistic and totalizing. They suppress the true cultural diversity of the United States in their focus on a small group of representative writers and myths. This critique has led to a far-reaching revision and extension of the canon and the curricula established by the myth and symbol school.
- 2) From a political point of view, the theories of American Culture on which the work of the myth and symbol school and the consensus historians is based, were submitted to a radical ideological and political critique, because these theories, in their exceptionalism-inspired focus on American ideals and the uniqueness of American identity, had a tendency to

¹ We are using the term revisionism here as a broad umbrella term to refer to the common project of different critical schools and approaches in the writing of American social and cultural history to revise formalist modes of reading established by New Criticism and, in American Studies, the myth and symbol school. These attempts at revision are based on persuasions in literary theory or politics that can be quite different and range from liberal to radical.

ignore such bitter realities of American history as racism, the oppression of women, and the stigmatization of minorities of ethnic descent or sexual preference. Consequently, the revisionism in American Studies has led to a radical ideological critique of American cultural myths and has found its strongest manifestation in the so-called "race, class, and gender studies," that is, approaches which focus on the critical role of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual preference in American culture.

- 3) From a global, trans-national perspective, the search for a unique American identity or the meaning of a mythic "America" appears as an obsolete project in which the artificial boundaries of the nation-state are re-enacted and re-enforced. As recent "border theory" and other approaches have argued, American Studies should therefore redefine itself as trans-national studies or as studies of the Americas.
- 4) Methodologically, the revisionist focus on the diversity of American culture has had the consequence of questioning the possibility of any attempt at a comprehensive interpretation of American culture, since each of the formerly neglected groups and voices insists on a history "in its own right." This cultural re-empowerment coincides with – and draws a lot of its theoretical justification from – the postmodern critique of meta-narratives as a form of representation that excludes – and thereby disenfranchises – the marginal, the local and the "singular."

However, if, hermeneutically speaking, every observation of a single phenomenon needs a frame of reference or context in order to become meaningful, then the focus on the local or the singular cannot evade such a need for theoretical contextualization. Or, to put it differently: the "local" or the "singular," too, is only meaningful as an object of study in the context of a social theory of the "marginal," or a theoretical argument for "local knowledge" or a philosophical or legal theory of the status of singularity. And indeed, revisionist work in American Studies cannot and does not escape that logic, although it pursues different ways to establish the significance of its findings. As a rule, the claim for significance or representativeness is no longer based on an organicist assumption about the metaphoric quality of a single phenomenon, as it is in the myth and symbol school, but on a metonymic mode of argumentation in which single objects "stand for" a larger context, without, however, being related to it by similarity. Consequently, the impact of images on theories of American culture has increased.

In contrast to the self-perception of many of its practitioners, the new revisionist scholarship in American Studies has thus not successfully discarded theories of American culture. On the contrary. Not only does it remain dependent on them for clarifying the significance of its work. One may also say that it is the whole point of the new revisionism that it wants to

change our view of, and attitude towards, American society and culture. (Even trans-national approaches are clearly aimed at American self-perception and self-definition.) It is not, in other words, that theories of American society and culture are no longer possible or desirable; what has changed is that older theories have been – or should be – replaced by new, revised theories.

However, the current situation in American Studies is characterized by the fact that these theories hardly ever become the subject of debate. They exist mainly in vague, un- or underdifferentiated concepts such as sexism, racism, or homophobia, although such concepts, apt as they may be to point to central aspects of American society and culture, cannot possibly grasp the complex interaction of cultural and political forces in modern democratic societies. Moreover, they cannot satisfactorily clarify the significance the interpreter attributes to such attitudes for an understanding of American society and culture, because the political meaning and cultural significance to be drawn from critical concepts such as sexism or racism is by no means self-explanatory. Obviously, they can be employed in very different intellectual contexts, ranging from mainstream liberalism to various radical points of view. Is the persistence of sexist or racist attitudes in American culture seen as invisible, all-pervasive effect of a pathology that cannot be overcome by political reform? Or are patriarchy and racism seen as cultural attitudes that are surprisingly resilient but nevertheless gradually undermined and replaced in an ongoing process of critique and negotiation? Or are they seen as discourses that illustrate the fact that the true power of the system resides in culture and not politics and that we therefore need entirely new forms of social engagement? In each case, the same analysis implies a completely different assessment of American society and culture, ranging from pathological to democratic to oppressive.

We think it is high time that the implicit assumptions that shape our interpretations of American society and culture, including those of the recent revisionism, become a topic in American Studies, for they are the crucial constituents of these interpretations. We fully agree with the current revisionism that tacit political premises and cultural values form an important part of every interpretation of society and culture (although we strongly disagree with the conflation of these realms). But the logical consequence of the claim that the perception and interpretation of cultural phenomena is shaped by political factors and that "politics," on the other hand, is decisively determined by cultural discourse is not to repeat this conviction ritualistically but to apply it and to make one's own premises not only explicit but a subject of debate.

This issue of REAL consists in part of papers read at the conference "Theories of American Culture" at the John F. Kennedy-Institute for North

American Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin in May 2002. In organizing the conference, we aimed at a plurality of positions that reflect current debates in American Studies; in order to broaden this spectrum of voices even further, we invited other interested colleagues to add their views to those presented at the conference. Altogether, this makes for a broad survey of theoretical work currently done in American Studies. If some readers miss a more systematic approach, this possible complaint raises the interesting question whether – and to what extent – recent developments in American Studies have undermined the possibility for a comprehensive, systematic analysis of “America.” Perhaps this suspicion makes more sense from a position abroad (and thus it may not be accidental that the conference focusing on this question was organized outside of the U.S.), because, at present more than ever, the way in which non-Americans encounter American society and culture is not through multiple selves and happily hybridized border cultures but in a more systemic form. We hope therefore that the contributions to this volume, no matter what their politics and views on the topic of theories of American culture are, may at least have the effect of putting the topic itself back on the agenda of American Studies.

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American Studies Reconsidered