The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism*

I. Professionalization and the (failed) Promise of Meaning

The humanities have been decisively reshaped by their transformation into a competitive profession. This transformation is, at present, most advanced in the United States where growing professionalization encourages a race for new and "original" insights which compete for visibility. The result is an academic culture of constant redescription which, in turn, leads to a growing fragmentation of knowledge. While the volume of scholarship increases steadily, the volume of available knowledge is thus constantly reduced. Ironically enough, however, scholars in the humanities have little interest in working against this trend because they are profiting from it in two significant ways: First, professionally, the increasing fragmentation and decontextualization of knowledge provides the individual scholar with a golden opportunity for individual distinction, because decontextualization is a useful precondition for offering new and apparently "original" readings. Second, culturally, the practice of scholarship in the humanities that has become dominant, especially in the United States, opens up entirely new possibilities for an expressive individualism that bases its claims of recognition on the notion of "difference." The current cultural radicalism in the humanities, which defines itself in contrast to earlier forms of political radicalism, can be seen as a manifestation of this expressive individualism.

In a way, one might claim, the future of American Studies seems to be more promising than ever. Because there are so many contested issues and intellectual challenges in the field, American Studies have gained greatly in theoretical interest. On the institutional level, the number of professional positions created after World War II in colleges and universities all over

* First published in *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 49-71; reprinted in *The Future of American Studies*. Eds. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. 211-230, and, in an extended form under the title "The Modernity of America and the Practice of Scholarship," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. Ed. Thomas Bender. Berkeley, Los Angeles: U of California P, 2002. 343-366. The essay printed here draws on both versions.

the world is remarkable. At the same time, this successful intellectual and institutional expansion has intensified a problem from which the humanities suffer in general, namely that of a proliferation of knowledge.[1] Ironically enough, this development threatens to undermine the very promise which underlies the success-story of the humanities: the promise of meaning. If an interpretation is to provide more than the forceful articulation of subjectivity, then it should aim at the integration of a number of other perspectives on the text. However, if there are roughly 20 different theoretical approaches to the interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* and more than 1000 interpretations of the book, all defining themselves against each other and thus differing from other readings by principle, it is no longer possible to set up relations between them in order to sort out their respective strengths and weaknesses – unless, one wants to thematize this problem itself in a metatheoretical comparison of approaches. But, as we will see, that creates problems of its own.

A paradoxical professional logic that transforms an indispensable strategy of critical insight and interpretive correction into a source of fragmentation and potential disorientation is at work here. In principle, a plurality of interpretative approaches is useful for helping us to gain a critical perspective on an object and thus to correct an apparently inescapable dialectic of blindness and insight which characterizes all interpretations of world and text. Once plurality becomes endless proliferation, however, the initial gain threatens to become a loss.[1] Because we are overwhelmed by a flood of ever new approaches and interpretive claims, scholarly work begins to lose its power of correction and functions as mere displacement.[2] There are simply too many different claims to assess their validity or to establish meaningful connections between them in order to put them into perspective. The full impact of this constantly increasing proliferation of meaning-making is demonstrated by the fact that even those who hold a critical perspective on the competitive or disruptive nature of the present social and academic system cannot help but contribute to this process, because they have to work within the same institutional framework.

Under present conditions, the institutionalized mode of production of knowledge has therefore gained priority over any ideological position in determining the function and effects of work in the humanities. One could argue, for example, that the recent revisionism in American Studies has provided a

---

1 The same could be said for specialization. As a research strategy, specialization is indispensable and an important source of insight. As an institutionalized mode of dealing with knowledge, the gain may become a loss when the sheer number of observations or interpretations can no longer be integrated and quantity minimizes the meaningfulness of knowledge. I develop this point at more length in "The Americanization of Literary Studies."

2 On this point, cf. David Bordwell: "… it is just that, in American institutions of higher education, intellectual disputes among competing premises and methods tend to be avoided simply by adding the 'new approach' onto existing structures" (96).

fundamental and long-needed change in perspective. But once this perspective is established, it becomes part of the same formation of knowledge production that characterizes the scholarship it replaces. Another race for professional distinction through difference begins, as, to give but one example, the recent criticism on Kate Chopin and *The Awakening* demonstrates (of which, in contrast to *Huckleberry Finn*, we hardly had any interpretations before 1969). Because the novel was neglected for such a long time, it now attracts a lot of critical attention. But the more interpretations we get, the greater the dispersal of meaning because all of these interpretations must, by definition, correct prior interpretations in order to justify their existence. What started out as a heroic effort to recover a representative work thus leads to an endless flow of ever new views that ultimately begins to undermine any basis for a claim of representativeness. In the end, *The Awakening* is "great" because, like *Huck Finn* or *The Scarlet Letter*, it can stimulate and accommodate any number of interpretations. Its cultural significance has been absorbed by its professional usefulness.

No particular approach or position is to "blame" for this situation, because it is produced by historical developments that go beyond the impact of any particular position. My argument should thus not be confused with the conservative criticism of the alleged fragmentation of canons or values brought about by the recent revisionism in literary or American Studies and/or by the emergence of Cultural Studies. Actually, I think that the impact of these developments on the idea of the canon is often exaggerated, because, inevitably, these movements merely replace older canons by a new set of preferred and canonized works to which critics return again and again. Thus, in discussions in which challenges to existing canons are blamed for "fragmentation," the term fragmentation is often used as a code word for value conflicts or political disagreements. The fragmentation of knowledge I am talking about here has been going on before and after such recent revisions and is not tied in any causal and unique way to any of them. It has epistemological, social and institutional reasons. Its origin lies in historicism and its insistence that sense-making and interpretation are historical acts; consequently, each period, generation, and group will feel the need to offer its own interpretation of a phenomenon. This tendency has been accelerated, in fact, institutionalized as a professional practice, by professionalization and the emergence of an academic culture of knowledge production.

Gradually, but especially after the explosion of higher education after World War II, this professionalization has begun to change the function of cultural and historical reinterpretation and has inverted earlier priorities. While professionalization originally had the purpose of providing interpretation with a solid institutional and methodological base, it has now tied reinterpretation to professional advancement. This means that, while in the past each generation or group had its reason for reinterpretation, now each scholar

has. This reinterpretation, in turn, must be defined by disagreement and difference, for otherwise it would not meet professional criteria for qualification. A feminist scholar cannot simply publish an essay in which she praises another feminist's interpretation of Kate Chopin. There has to be, at least to a certain extent, a revision, disagreement, or contradiction in order to justify her intervention professionally. Historicism may thus authorize reinterpretation but professionalization institutionalizes disagreement and difference as professional necessity.[3] The result is a breathtaking proliferation of work, whether "conservative" or "progressive," that undermines (and delegitimizes) all interpretations in similar ways, because, in a professional culture of institutionalized difference, a text can no longer be taken as "representative" for anything but the author's professional qualification.[4]

Quantity is not the only or the major problem of the current proliferation of meaning-production, however. Even if one would have the time, energy and institutional possibilities to sort out the strengths and weaknesses of diverse approaches and innumerable interpretations, and aim at an integration of the knowledge produced by these various approaches, there would no longer be any point in doing so, because these interpretations are generated by the professional need to be different, so that a metatheoretical comment on their adequacy or inadequacy would be considered as "policing." Such a metatheoretical position would be inconceivable anyhow, however, because it would have to be based on the premise of a possibility to evaluate interpretive truth-claims, which would have no consensual basis after the demise of the "grand narratives." Thus, nowadays methodological discussions go into exactly the opposite direction, namely that of unmasking theoretical or methodological claims for interpretive adequateness as disguised power games. The only consensus remaining seems to be a broadly defined anti-foundationalism, which is strong in subverting arguments for general criteria on which claims for interpretive adequateness could be based but weak in suggesting possible alternatives, unless one wants to accept the neo-pragmatist advice to do what one does anyway as such an alternative.

---

3 Of course, there is also the possibility that she has discovered something new, but such cases, increasingly, become rare moments. Moreover, as the example of Chopin is supposed to show, as soon as new material or a new topic is discovered or introduced, it becomes subject to the same professional logic I am describing.

4 Again, there is, in my view, no escape from this development, because one cannot ignore the postmodern and poststructuralist critique of the arbitrariness of each act of centering. This, in fact, provides an important theoretical justification for Cultural Studies, because the less we can privilege certain texts or interpretations as "representative" sources of insight, the more we need to extend our scope of material. However, the more we extend our scope, the more we accelerate the process of diffusion and proliferation. This problem cannot be solved by taking back the claim of representativeness to a privileged subculture or to one's favorite dissenting voice, because, inevitably, the process of diffusion will renew and repeat itself on this level for the institutional reasons described.

The current anti-foundationalism reflects the changing institutional and social conditions of a profession that has gone from being a self-appointed guardian of cultural and social values to being a white collar profession with its own pressures for professional distinction.[5] One of the basic problems of democracy, already diagnosed perceptively by Tocqueville, namely that of distinguishing oneself from the mass of others, repeats itself on the professional level and creates an escalating logic of "strong" (over)statements which serve the purpose of standing out from the rest. The more interpretations on *Huckleberry Finn*, the greater the pressure and need to out-perform them. To say, in this situation, that one of the many influences which shapes Huck Finn's remarkably original and innovative vernacular voice is that of the African American speech pattern with which the young Samuel Clemens got acquainted during his youth in the Southern town Hannibal is an important insight and a valuable addition to our understanding of the novel. But, as an interpretive claim, it is too modest and "sane" in order to stand out from a voluminous body of scholarship on the many important aspects of the book. If one exaggerates this find, however, to suggest that Huck's voice is really a black voice, then this is a startling statement which catches people's attention.[6] Most Twain-scholars may find the first claim valid and few may agree with the second, but in the white collar race for distinction this does not really matter. What counts is visibility and this purpose can best and most quickly be achieved by strong overstatement.[7] Thus, an endless spiral is set

5 I have called this development the "Americanization" of literary and Cultural Studies in a different context. By Americanization I mean an advanced stage of professionalization, developed most clearly and strongly in the U.S., but setting new standards for scholarship in the humanities all over the world. Again, one should emphasize that this professional structure characterizes and shapes work of the Left and the Right with equal force. For a more extended discussion of some of the consequences, cf. my essay on "The Americanization of Literary Studies."

6 As the question mark in the title of Shelley Fisher Fishkin's book *Was Huck Black?* indicates, this claim, in parts of the book, remains on the level of a tantalizing suggestion, while, in other parts, where Fishkin tries to rescue the novel from the charge of racism, it goes beyond mere suggestion: "Given our awareness now of the extent to which Huck's voice was black, black students who find themselves identifying with Huck may feel somewhat less ambivalence. After all, they are not identifying 'against' their race: rather, they are choosing which of two black voices in the book they find more appealing" (107). The point here is the *structure* of the argument, the extension of a valuable insight into an overstatement. It is important to point out that this procedure is not tied to any particular political perspective or revisionist aim, as a look at *Huck Finn*-criticism of the Fifties and Sixties can quickly reveal. Fishkin has only done what innumerable other interpretations of formalist persuasions did, when they claimed, for example, to have discovered that a certain motif, theme, or pattern provided the novel with organic unity and had thus to be seen as key to the meaning of the novel. For a more detailed analysis of the structure and development of Fishkin's argument, see my review of the book in *Amerikastudien/American Studies.*

7 American literary criticism has therefore created a whole new terminology for

in motion: The more scholarly work exists, the greater the need for difference and interpretative disagreement in order to distinguish oneself. However, the greater the disagreement, the greater the fragmentation. The greater the fragmentation, the greater the need – and chance! – for new interpretations. But the more interpretations we get, the greater the tendency to devalue individual interpretations and thus, in turn, the greater the need to stand out by forceful overstatement.

II. The Theory Boom

For a while, the solution to this proliferation of meaning-production seemed to be "theory." Theory was defined as an intellectual discipline of reflecting systematically about the premises and methodological problems of interpretation. By now, however, theory has been transformed from a systematic philosophical discipline into another area of professional empowerment. In its current use and application, theory has not solved the crisis of orientation in the humanities. On the contrary, it has deepened the crisis, not only by becoming useful "symbolic capital" in the professional race for distinction, but also by feeding and accelerating this race in entirely new and unforeseen ways. The special usefulness of theory for this purpose lies in two aspects. To start with, theory can function as a short cut, because it permits the description and characterization of an interpretive object without long, extended study. This extended study can be avoided because theory, as a rule and for good reasons, aims at general statements (often of a sweeping nature), so that explanatory claims tie the interpretation of cultural material to historical laws, social conditions, human faculties, linguistic or cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and so forth. In the appropriation of theory by a new generation of scholars, theory has begun to change its nature; however it, too, becomes a form of symbolic capital that is judged not by its systematic range but by its "strong claims"-potential.[8]

This explains two striking facts about the present theory boom in the humanities. On the one hand, it has been observed that almost none of the thinkers who have dominated critical theory in literary and Cultural Studies

---

assessing the significance of an analysis – adjectives such as "highly suggestive," "powerful," or "dazzling" – which are taken from the culture of performance. This is not to say that any wild or outrageous claim may succeed. Obviously, the critic has to find the right balance between overstatement and acceptability. But "acceptability" is no longer a hermeneutically based term but a primarily social one, reflecting professional networks and other "power games." What the critic needs in this situation is, above all, a "radar," to use David Riesman's key term for the other-directed person.

8 Cf. David Bordwell: "In an institution that favors novelty, the stakes constantly rise. The critical exemplars get mastered, and for all their merits, they come to seem obvious. They must be surpassed" (*Making Meaning* 246).

fare well in their original disciplines, where their theories and statements are considered to be too sweeping and undifferentiated – which is, on the other hand, exactly the basis for their appropriation by other disciplines. The fact that the "exchange value" of theory as symbolic capital dominates its current application also explains the fact that many European theories which had been developed over years of patient scholarly work were imported wholesale into the new American market for theory and used up in rapid succession, so that, by now, American scholarship seems to have run out of imports. The reason for this mode of appropriation is that theory has become a form of symbolic capital in the white collar race for distinction and difference. Nobody has "refuted" the mode of textual analysis practiced by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* or, to give another example, the basic insights and claims of reception theory. They do no longer play a role in critical discussions, not because they have been disproven, but because they are no longer "on the cutting edge" of professional distinction.

III. Cultural Radicalism

However, the most striking aspect about recent developments in the humanities and especially American Studies, is not their theoretical but their radical nature. The dominant approaches of the past fifteen years, ranging from poststructuralism and deconstruction, new historicism and cultural materialism to the various versions of race, class, and gender studies, may be widely different in many of their arguments, premises, and procedures. What unites them is a new form of radicalism which, in contrast to older forms of political radicalism, I would like to call cultural radicalism, because the central source of political domination is no longer attributed to the level of political institutions and economic structures but to culture.[9] The origin of this paradigm shift in the definition of power lies in the student movement of the late 1960s. In response to the puzzling and irritating fact that the "oppressed" did not form political coalitions with the students and following the lead, above all, of Herbert Marcuse, a critique of the capitalist system based on instances of political repression was replaced by the idea of "structural" or "systemic" power,[10] that is, by a redefinition of power as exerted not by

9 For a more detailed analysis, see my essay on "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism." In the following analysis, my purpose is not to discredit this new form of radicalism, which has opened up important new perspectives, but to understand the logic of its choices.

10 The concept used by the German student movement for this systemic effect was *strukturelle Gewalt*. The term does not only express the central idea of a form of power that manifests itself not through an agent or somebody's action (hence the usefulness of the idea of structure), but also describes this "invisible" exertion of power through structure as a form of coercion or violence (*Gewalt*).

agents or institutions of the state but by the system's cunning ways of constituting "subjects" or ascribing "identities" through cultural forms. Political radicalism tied its analysis to a particular political movement or party within the spectrum of political possibilities, and, more specifically, to the eventual ability of the oppressed to gain a certain measure of awareness and political consciousness through the experience of their oppression or disenfranchisement. In contrast, recent critical theories, different as they may be in many respects, nevertheless have one basic premise in common (and are amazingly predictable in this one respect): they all take as their point of departure the assumption that there is an all-pervasive, underlying systemic element that constitutes the system's power in an "invisible," yet highly effective way. The names given to this systemic effect change; they have included the "prison-house of language," "ideology redefined as semiotic system," "the reality effect," "the ideological state apparatus," "the cinematic apparatus," "the symbolic order," "discursive regime," "logocentrism," "patriarchy," "whiteness," or "Western thought."[11] But the basic claim is always the same: the "invisible" power effect of the systemic structure derives from the fact that it determines meaning and the perception of the world before the individual is even aware of it, by constituting the linguistic and cultural patterns through which we make sense of the world.

This redefinition of power has led to a constant pressure to outradicalize others.[12] If power resides in hitherto unacknowledged aspects of language, discourse, or the symbolic order, then there is literally no limit to ever new and more radical discoveries of power effects. And if it is power that determines cultural meaning, then the major question must be that of the possibility or impossibility of opposition. "Opposition," however, also changes its nature. In view of the shrewd containment of all resistance by discursive regimes, the only way out lies in radical otherness or difference. Thus, the development of cultural radicalism has taken a characteristic course: from neo-Marxism with its critique of the market (which still implies the possibility of resistance) to Foucauldian neo-historicism (which unmasks this form of resistance as really a hidden form of complicity) to race, class, and gender

11 It would be fascinating, indeed, to compare these categories as different versions of the idea of systemic effect: their range of explanation, their implied definition of the system, their definition of what can constitute resistance, and so on.

12 As Wolfram Schmidgen has shown in his brilliant analysis, "The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism," the interpretive practice of cultural radicalism is anchored by the search for an "absent cause" which critical theory tells us must be there. This means, in turn, that the plausibility of an interpretation is not determined by the plausibility and skill of a close reading of the text, but – since the absent cause is, in principle, everywhere and thus need not be pursued in detail – by the "powerfulness" and by the radical credentials of the theory that anchors the interpretation and of which the interpretation presents an allegorical version. Interpretive disagreements nowadays are therefore most often disagreements about how radical an analysis really is.

studies (which revive the possibility of resistance by locating it in "difference"). Actually, the current umbrella concept "race, class, and gender" is a misnomer because the category of "class" cannot constitute radical difference. Consequently, class analysis is no longer a genuine theoretical option for the new cultural radicalism, while, sexual preference, on the other hand, constitutes elementary, unbridgeable difference and has therefore moved to the center of revisionist approaches.

By resting all hopes of resistance on the category of difference, another theoretical problem is created, however, because a term for denoting unbridgeable otherness is used as the basis for a broadly defined group-identity that does not account for the possibility of difference within this group. Hence, a constant movement or "sliding" in the use of the category "difference" can be observed: in order to make the concept politically meaningful, it must be used as a comprehensive category of distinction and must be equated with a particular gender, ethnic or racial group, or form of sexual preference. Such redefinition of difference as, for example, racial or engendered identity runs the danger, however, of re-essentializing identity and works against the very idea of difference. The problem arises from the fact that a category taken from linguistic and semiotic analysis, where it describes an uncontrollable dissemination of meaning, is employed to justify claims for social recognition. In the first context, it is an anti-representational term, used to deconstruct a belief in the possibility of representation; in the second, the idea of representation is not only revived but becomes the central criterion for judging and classifying cultural texts.[13] Arguments within race, class, and gender studies constantly oscillate between the two options of the term and arrest them almost at will wherever needed. In accordance with the professional culture of performance, difference is used as a means of self-definition and of self-empowerment. This, in fact, is the thrust and net result of the current cultural radicalism in the humanities. Since power is redefined as an effect of systemic structures that are virtually everywhere, the term is no longer a category of political analysis, but a word for all possible barriers to the self. And since the self is, in principle, constituted by systemic effects or is seen, at best, as the site of conflicting systemic effects, it can only be defined through difference, so that the claim or assertion of difference becomes the supreme form of self-empowerment.[14]

---

13 In his book *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory speaks of "a confusion between representation in the political sense – the relation of a representative to a constituency – and representation in the rather different sense of the relation between an image and what the image represents" (viii). I think it is more adequate, however, to speak not of a confusion but of a conflation.

14 This cultural self-empowerment is not to be equated with "real" social or political empowerment (although it may have such consequences – witness, for example, the impact of feminism in American Studies). The term is understood here as imaginary construct and refers to the possibility of imagining and fashioning oneself as different

The far-reaching radicalization of the humanities in the U.S. has been an entirely unforeseen and highly surprising development from a European point of view. Radicalism reemerged in the U.S. after it had just turned dogmatic in Europe and had thereby discredited itself completely. One of the recurring arguments of conservatives during the heyday of the student movement in France, Germany and other European countries was the charge of ideologization, which was considered a typically European legacy, and regularly contrasted with Anglo-Saxon "common sense." As it turned out, however, "common sense" was no match for radicalization. Why? And why was there no consideration of the negative experiences in Europe? The explanation, I think, lies in the fact that this new-wave American radicalization is not what it appears (and often claims) to be, namely a critical theory with political goals and a political theory. Although it is constantly pointed out that not only the private but literally every aspect of social life is political, there is no systematic reflection on the structures or procedures through which the claims of difference or "the other" could become political reality. One reason surely is that the realization of one claim inevitably runs the danger of violating the claims of somebody else. Such "violations" can only be justified on the basis of a set of normative ideas, but normative ideas violate difference, as the various forms of poststructuralist and neopragmatist antifoundationalism point out again and again. There was nothing to be learned, then, from European political radicalism, because the new form of cultural radicalism has entirely different goals: it pursues a politics of self-empowerment, and its analyses thus need no longer be based on Marxist or other social theories that attempt to describe the relation between various groups and members of the political system as a whole. Instead, radicalism can focus on the systemic barriers to self-empowerment while, politically speaking, it remains a form of interest group politics or an untheorized form of radical egalitarianism. The problem, then, is not that the humanities have been instrumentalized by politics, as conservatives have it. As cultural radicalism rightly claims, there is no way around politics. The interesting theoretical problem is that they have been appropriated by what, in following the lead of Robert Bellah, I would like to call the politics of expressive individualism.[15]

IV. Expressive Individualism

The important point to grasp here is that expressive individualism is not a narcissist deformation but a successful end-product of a central project in the

– stronger, weaker, non-white, etc. – and thereby as distinct and not subject to an all-pervasive systemic effect.

15 Although I do not see a ready alternative, I am aware of the difficulties the term poses. One is the communitarian bias in Bellah's use of the term individualism. As the following paragraph is to show, I do not share this view.

humanities. It does not reflect the humanities' crisis but rather their success. Imaginary self-empowerment through cultural difference is not a pathological distortion of the true goals and function of the humanities but a modern manifestation of a promise of self-empowerment in which the humanities have played a crucial role since their inception. The intellectual justification and support of individual development and self-assertion is a major element of what we call modernity (in the sense of *Neuzeit*). Crucial "breakthroughs" in Western intellectual development that stand at the center of the humanities such as the philosophical "discovery" of the subject, the idea of the Enlightenment, the doctrine of individual rights, the modern understanding of the aesthetic as a non-mimetic mode of experience, or the "reinvention" of literature as a fictive realm to transgress the boundaries of existing worlds, have all contributed to this process of individualization and provided it with both intellectual tools and moral justification.[16] My claim is that, contrary to its self-perception, the current cultural radicalism does not stand in opposition to this process but merely represents a new, radicalized stage of it.

The process of individualization in Western societies can be divided into two major stages, as suggested by Bellah and his co-authors in their study *Habits of the Heart*, where a distinction is made between economic or utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Disregarding the nostalgic communitarian context of their argument, I find these terms heuristically useful in drawing attention to two different manifestations of individualism

16 I am deliberately using the term "individual" here, and I am using it in the Tocquevillian sense of the smallest social unit. In this sense, "individual" is not to be confused with "individualist," "individualistic," or an ideology of individualism defined by claims of personal freedom or autonomy. It is also not to be confused and conflated with philosophical conceptualizations of the individual such as "subject" or "self." Deconstructing the category of the subject does not affect the use of the term individual as a sociological category because it only deconstructs a particular philosophical interpretation given to that social unit. The fact that the concept of the subject may be an illusion of Western thought and that, consequently, there are no (unified) subjects, does not mean that there are no individuals. Every scholar in the profession acts as such an individual, no matter what his or her status of self-definition as a subject (illusionary unity, correctly decentered, or happily performative) may be said to be. That such a retreat from the category of the "subject" might be of use for philosophy as well is pointed out by John Smith: "The 'subject' I shall relegate to a philosophical paradigm culminating in Descartes. That paradigm attempts to define 'self-consciousness,' which I take to be a fact, mistakenly in terms of self-reflection. Moreover, that paradigm tends to limit notions of selfhood to self-conscious subjectivity. I shall argue, in good measure following Manfred Frank's lead, that the concept of the 'individual' is more fruitful for our self-understanding. It allows us to shift attention away from the (historically) limited views of subjectivity and self-reflection without abandoning ontologically, politically, epistemologically, and semiotically necessary notions of particularity (resistance to the universal) and interpretation (dialectic between individual and universal). In short, we can abandon the subject but need the individual to arrive at richer conceptions of meaning, self, consciousness, and action" (82).

in the modern age which, in going beyond Bellah, can best be distinguished by reference to two different sources of self-definition and self-esteem. In the traditional form of economic individualism analyzed by Max Weber and numerous others after him, self-esteem is derived primarily from economic success and social recognition. In order to obtain these, the individual has to go through an often long and painful act of deferred gratification and self-denial. Analogous to the act of saving, the goal is to accumulate a stock of capital, in both economic and social terms, which will eventually yield its profits in the form of increased social approval and a rise in the social hierarchy. The prototypical literary genres of this economic individualism are the autobiographical success-story, but also the *Bildungsroman* or the story of female education, as, for example, the domestic novel. They are teleological in conception, their basic narrative pattern is that of a rise or fall, their recurring emotional dramas are the experience of injustice and the withholding of just rewards, but also, possibly, a final moment of triumphant retribution; their ideal is the formation of a character that is strong enough to survive this long ordeal of social apprenticeship.

In contrast, the culture of expressive individualism is not primarily concerned with a rise of the individual to social respectability or its (tragic or melodramatic) failure but with the search for self-realization. Its major issues are no longer economic success or the promise of social recognition but the assertion of cultural difference, that is, the ability of the individual to assert his or her own uniqueness and otherness against the powers of cultural convention and encroaching disciplinary regimes. If development and growth are key concepts of economic individualism, difference is the key concept of expressive individualism.[17] This change in the main sources of self-esteem is the logical outcome of an ever-intensified process of individualization and, coming along with it, increasingly radical forms of cultural dehierarchization. In this process, the individual has to assert his or her self-worth in opposition to those forces that stand in its way. Initially, these were obvious sources of inequality such as caste, class, or patriarchy. With the increasing democratization of Western societies – in itself a result of individualization – these sources of inequality have been undermined in authority, and have, in fact, often been dissolved or weakened decisively. Inequality remains, but

17 In many of these cases, the poststructuralist notion of *différance* provides a major inspiration but the conceptualizations of difference go far beyond poststructuralist versions. In historical terms, poststructuralism (including deconstruction) provides only one manifestation of this search for difference and is thus part of a larger trend of cultural and intellectual history. One reason for the growing historical importance of the need to be different can be inferred from Tocqueville's observation that democratic societies take away symbolic distinctions. By doing so, they settle the individual with the task of making up for this loss. In economic individualism, the possibilities for doing this are still limited in comparison to expressive individualism, where the resources of culture have moved to the forefront.

it can no longer be as easily attributed to social structures. Hence the search for new "systemic effects" of inequality, and hence an increased importance of self-fashioning by means of cultural difference.

If the source of power is cultural, however, then culture must also serve as the source of counter-definition and the search for self-realization must become the search for alternate cultural options. It is therefore culture which takes the place of the economy as the major model for self-realization, self-assertion, and self-fashioning, because the realm of culture provides something like an archive or store-house of different models of self-definition. In contrast to the realm of the economy, where self-discipline and a strong "identity" are the most desirable qualities, culture offers an almost inexhaustible supply of options for role-taking and imaginary self-empowerment. Ironically, it is nowadays not a ritual of consent that absorbs "the radical energies of history," (90) as Sacvan Bercovitch has it, but a new stage of individual self-empowerment, articulated most forcefully by cultural radicalism, that redefines political engagement or professional activities as cultural option of self-definition and thus as one possibility of role-taking among many.

As a form of expressive individualism, radicalism changes its function. Instead of providing an ideological base for political analysis, it becomes an intellectual tool for the pursuit of difference. This explains its most striking feature: its focus on, if not obsession with, the question of oppositionalism. The striking fact that cultural radicalism's interest in literature seems almost entirely absorbed by the problem of whether literary texts were truly oppositional or not is closely linked with the question of cultural difference: "Opposition is the best way to assert cultural difference, for it is opposition that allows difference to emerge most clearly and pointedly" (Fluck, "Cultures of Criticism" 222f.). Thus, cultural radicalism can nowadays be regarded as one of the supreme manifestations of expressive individualism in the realm of the humanities. Although it sees itself as a political turn in cultural and literary studies, including American Studies, it really represents, at a closer look, another turn of the screw in the cultural history of individualization. This individualism needs radical dehierarchization to eliminate cultural restrictions on self-empowerment, but it also needs the cultural construction of difference to escape from the consequences of radical equality. In this sense, cultural radicalism does not provide an alternative to individualism but a more radicalized version of individualization, not a critique of individualism by "politics" but a critique based on the politics of expressive individualism.

My point, then, is that it is the transition from economic to expressive individualism that stands at the center of recent developments in the humanities, including American Studies.[18] The effects of this development have been

18 Obviously, these two forms are not neatly separated in their actual historical appearance. There are mixed forms and many forms of coexistence. Benjamin Franklin, whom Bellah mentions as exemplary representative of economic individualism, is

ambiguous. By turning intellectual and scholarly work into imaginary role-taking, the attractiveness of literary and Cultural Studies for the individual has increased, while their importance and social relevance have decreased.[19] The more important and useful the humanities become for the individual in search of imaginary self-empowerment, the more irrelevant single insights or claims to representativeness become for society. It is thus the expressive reconfiguration of individualism that I see as the driving force in the current development of the humanities and American Studies. As long as cultural radicalism uses the category of the political to give authority to its own claims of self-definition, this aspect is effectively obscured. In this version, the political is opposed to individualism, because individualism is regarded as a typical manifestation of capitalism. Actually, however, individualism is a product of modernity whose idea of self-development also provides the basis for cultural radicalism, although the extension of the possibilities of the individual is no longer seen in terms of "growth" but in terms of an increased space for "performance."[20]

To talk about individualism is thus not to pass a moral judgment on "selfishness." It was Tocqueville who already noted that individualism is not to be confused with egotism or selfishness. As an integral part of a process of modernization, individualism is a social attitude which also attracts those who would distance themselves strongly not only from egotism but from cultural radicalism. To give but one example from my own professional background: in its redefinition of literary meaning as (partly) the result of an actualization through the reader, reception theory has given a theoretical boost to

---

also a master of self-fashioning. But this talent is still instrumentalized for, and subordinated to, the goal of a social rise to material success and social respectability. On the whole, it seems warranted to say, that a) the social role of expressive individualism has dramatically increased since its first "break-through" manifestations in the Romantic period; b) this development was propelled decisively by the growing authority of art and other forms of cultural self-expression, but, especially, by the increased possibilities of imaginary self-empowerment offered through fiction; and c) this gradually emerging expressive individualism has found a whole new range of options in the era of postindustrialism and postmodernism with its new "post-materialist" values of self-realization and radical self-determination. While the Romantic period and the experimental culture of modernism can be seen as avantgarde movements of expressive individualism, the postmodern period has witnessed the broad "democratization" of their cultural insistence on the right (and need) to be different.

19 This development was already noted with regret by, among others, Herbert Gutman in his essay "The Missing Synthesis. Whatever Happened to History?" and Thomas Bender in "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History."

20 An excellent discussion of the ambiguities of modernity, which could provide a useful basis for a reconsideration of the contribution the humanities have made to modernity and the process of modernization, is provided by John Tomlinson in chap. 5 of his study *Cultural Imperialism*, in which he draws on the work of Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernism* and Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*.

individualization within literary studies – as has literary modernism in general. The reason for this was not "selfishness," but quite the opposite, namely an anti-totalitarian impulse that sought to strengthen the individual through the perspectivizing potential of the reading experience, always basing this liberating move, however, on the normative interpretive horizon of hermeneutic theory. This, in fact, is a recurring event in the history of modernity. Its interventions on behalf of the individual are almost always based on the expectation of a new, unconstrained consensus of liberated individuals who are finally able to realize their true human potential. But it never turns out that way. Individualism gladly welcomes the new opening but soon disregards the norms and values that served as its justification.

V. Representing Herself

My analysis seems in many respects to tie into what must be considered the most penetrating recent analysis of the state of the humanities, John Guillory's *Cultural Capital,* which draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital. For Guillory, the crisis of the humanities reflects the fact that, as a form of creating capital, the humanities have become increasingly obsolete in a society in which techno-bureaucratic values dominate. Basically, Guillory attributes the crisis of the humanities to the emergence of a professional-managerial class in the university that "no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie:" "The decline of the humanities was never the result of newer noncanonical courses or texts, but of a large-scale 'capital flight' in the domain of culture" (45). The turn towards theory in the humanities thus "has the oblique purpose of signifying a rapprochement with the techno-bureaucratic constraints upon intellectual labor." But if "the career of the college professor is increasingly structured as a mimesis of the bureaucratic career" (253), why are intellectuals all over the world, and especially young people (often, and increasingly so, from marginalized groups) submitting themselves to this regime in the first place and in ever growing numbers, despite an often bleak professional outlook? The bureaucratization of higher learning along the lines of greater economic efficiency is indeed a crucial aspect of recent developments in the humanities. However, the deterioration of working conditions connected with it is obviously not yet strong enough to off-set promises of self-definition and self-empowerment that have increased with recent developments in most disciplines within the humanities. On the contrary, cultural radicalism has provided a profession once associated with the dust of archives with the allure of an avantgarde existence in postmodern times. As a consequence, what we are witnessing today is not, or not primarily, a redefinition of the humanities on the basis of the needs and values of a new "professional-managerial class" with its "techno-bureaucratic

constraints" but a redefinition of the humanities in terms of the needs of expressive individualism.

In Guillory's Marxist view, class analysis remains the best way to comprehend the crisis of the humanities. Since it is the function of the humanities to produce cultural capital, any crisis must signal a social and economic realignment. A new "class" needs new cultural capital. This argument perpetuates a view in which economic structures shape culture. It may be, however, that the cultural realm has turned into a sphere that is, increasingly, contradicting (not opposing) dominant economic and social structures (and thereby creating problems for them): While the economic sphere may indeed be governed by "techno-bureaucratic values," the cultural realm is nourishing forms of imaginary self-empowerment that contribute to a growing individualization of society – and, for that matter, to a potential subversion of "technocratic values." Contrary to what Guillory claims, the "distinction" offered by cultural material nowadays is no longer "based on inequality of access to cultural goods" (339) but on its performative and expressive potential for representing "difference." Guillory is right in claiming that the humanities, despite their own official self-image as disinterested search for meaning and aesthetic value, are seriously affected and transformed by professionalization. But the main pressures – and possibilities – that these professional structures exert do not tend to techno-bureaucratic streamlining but, on the contrary, to a proliferation of individual expression and self-definition. Guillory's theory of modernization as a relentless extension of techno-bureaucratic values to all areas of cultural meaning-production tells, at best, one side of the story, the organizational one. However, the work currently being done in the humanities is not simply homologous to the organizational pressures under which it is produced. On the contrary, if anything, it stands in opposition to such pressures and provides a whole array of arguments for the critique of systemic effects.

If one looks at the general development of work in the humanities since 1970, one unmistakable tendency stands out: What drives this development is neither a growing adaptation to "technocratic values," nor, on the other hand, simply a drive for professional "newness" per se.[21] To be sure, there is a constant and constantly growing professional pressure for newness but this race for newness stands in the service of an ever increasing process of individualization. To give an example, let me briefly trace some crucial stages of this development in my own field, that of American Studies. In doing so, I

21 For a succinct evocation of the role of "newness" in the writing of American history, see the beginning of Thomas Bender's essay "Wholes and Parts:" "The American cant of newness, so pervasive in the general culture, is all the more remarkable for its capacity to penetrate even specialized professional discourses. What a succession of 'new' histories populate the profession's recent past: the new economic history, the new labor history, the new social history, the new urban history, the new political history, and other greater or lesser 'news' too numerous to list" (120).

shall focus on a central question in the interpretation of cultural and historical material, that of the representativeness of one's material. For clearly, the usefulness of a historical study or cultural analysis will depend on the insight this material can provide beyond itself.

In the beginning, American Studies answered the question by following the traditions of intellectual history and literary history and based its interpretations of "the American experience" on the assumption that special artistic and intellectual achievements provided a kind of condensed insight into its inner nature. Scholars such as Perry Miller or F.O. Matthiessen concentrated on high culture because they looked for "profound" expressions of a given period in American history. In this approach, key documents in the history or ideas and works of art embody the highest potential of American civilization. The main objection to this view came from sociological studies of American culture and, more specifically, of popular culture and the media. American Studies was criticized for linking a claim of representativeness with material that did not appear to speak for a large number of Americans. The answer to this challenge was provided by the categories of myth and symbol, through which individual texts could be described as manifestations of a widely shared cultural pattern and yet, at the same time, could also be interpreted as a significant expression of subjective experience (Cf. Henry Nash Smith's definition of myth as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" [*Virgin Land* vii].)

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 myths analyzed in books like *Virgin Land*[22] and replaced it with a more complex model of different social groups that stand in changing and varying relations to society's dominant myths. At the same time, the claims of the myth and symbol school were also undermined from within by a politicization in the study of patterns of thought, in which American myths were redefined as disguised, and therefore especially effective, forms of ideological control.[23] After these challenges from the outside and inside, it was no longer possible to regard a myth as expression of *the* American experience. On the contrary, one had to assume a countertradition that was not yet fully incorporated and that had to be unearthed

22 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 given 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" (21).

23 See the argument of Richard Slotkin, who traces America's present-day problems in Vietnam and elsewhere to the mythic belief in a regeneration through violence in his influential study *Regeneration Through Violence.*

from underneath the official self-definitions of American culture. In this revisionist form 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, than it was, in turn, criticized for its unwarranted generalizations and its unacknowledged essentialism. One point of this charge of "essentialism" is 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 fiction of sexual identity. To work against this discursive 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 "liberation" from biological fate still traps the female individual in a binary scheme. Feminist scholars can disagree on what constitutes female identity but they still assume that there is such a thing and that it can be represented in the double sense of the word. Hence, the next move 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 to group representativeness is thus radically dissolved. Consequently, to analyze a text or person in terms of the performance of gender can, in the final analysis, no longer provide any insight beyond itself, for no two performances are alike. The individual has liberated herself from the iron grip of group identities, but this achievement can only illustrate her own potential. In this, it ironically comes close to the single creative performance of the work of art from which early American Studies set out – with the one essential difference that the performing individual herself has now become the "work of art." The radical claims to individuality originally reserved for special artistic achievements have now been democratized.

In the intellectual history of a Perry Miller, women – unless their names were 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 something like an indirect representation, since the relevant works express deeper needs of all members of society. A myth is no longer restricted to an elite. In the new social history and in feminist studies, this "universalism" is finally discarded and women gain a voice of their own – but only insofar as their fate is representative for women in general. A domestic novel, for example, can merit interpretation as example of the ideological limits or subversive possibilities of the cult of domesticity. 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. Inevitably, in each case different historical or cultural material is considered representative. Consequently, 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. In this sense, historical or Cultural Studies will never run out of work, for they can always point out that prior work on the subject is still based on unwarranted generalizations. Ultimately, the individual can only represent her- or himself.[24] What I suggest, then, in thinking about the future of American Studies, is to pay more attention to the ways in which knowledge is produced in the field – and for what purpose.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970.

Bellah, Robert N. et al. *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.

Bender, Thomas. "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History." *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 120-36.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter.'* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.

Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. *L'institution imaginaire de la société*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.

Fluck, Winfried. "The Americanization of Literary Studies." *American Studies International* 28.2 (1990): 9-22.

-----. "Review of Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?" Amerikastudien/ American Studies* 39 (1994): 614-617.

-----. "Cultures of Criticism: *Moby-Dick*, Expressive Individualism, and the New Historicism." *REAL* 11 (1995): 207-228.

-----. "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism." *Why Literature Matters*. Eds. R. Ahrens and L. Volkmann. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1996. 211-234.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.

24 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."

Gutman, Herbert. "The Missing Synthesis. Whatever Happened to History?" *The Nation* (Nov. 21, 1981): 553-54.
Schmidgen, Wolfram. "The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism." *REAL* 11 (1995): 371-404.
Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860.* Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1950.
Smith, John H. "The 'Transcendance' of the Individual." *Diacritics* 19.2 (1989): 80-98.
Tomlinson, John. *Cultural Imperialism.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.
Veysey, Laurence. "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.