

Cultural Studies and the Problems of the Political

Mark Luccarelli

University of Oslo

In 1992 Alice Kessler-Harris wrote a piece for *American Quarterly* in an attempt to find a mediate position for American Studies in the debate between cultural pluralism and American national identity. For Kessler-Harris multiculturalism is best understood as part of a process of redefinition of an inherited, static and exhausted "shared" American identity. The critical attention given to the flowering of multiple identities is not inevitably an invitation "to abandon the concept of American identity." It may be understood, rather, as a process of "questioning" which "encourages us to enter into a new conversation about whether there is still a 'we' at the heart of American culture and to wonder how that 'we' is constituted . . ." ¹ The redefining process, she pointed out in a familiar argument, was necessitated by the 'silencing' of female and minority voices, "silences" that in effect underwrote the liberal national narrative which American Studies had helped to construct in the 1940s. And the attempt to reimpose consensus by contemporary conservatives, understandable as an attempt to recover a lost sense of community or cultural unity, is deplorable in its imposition of a static tradition, a sense of America "as fixed and given."

Kessler-Harris's piece addresses one of the mainstays of cultural studies (and postmodern politics) – the rise of ethnic particularism often defined (positively and negatively) as aggressively anti-nation-state. Working against this context, Kessler-Harris attempts to ground multiculturalism in

¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Cultural Locations: Positioning American Studies in the Great Debate," *American Quarterly* 44 (September 1992): pp. 299-312, 307, 309.

a larger process of national redefinition. She does not propose theoretical foundations for this process of redefinition, suggesting rather an open, pragmatic process of reappraisal and reconstruction, with the implication that this process can revive and re-form established political institutions. While I find this position hopeful, the question remains: what are the processes (political and cultural) around which such a reconstruction might occur? In this paper, I will suggest that in imagining this process, it should not, cannot, be understood in the terms proposed by contemporary cultural studies. The problem is that without a more explicitly drawn out political and historical context, "the process of revising and expanding the myths of American life to include more voices"² can lead only to confusion.

The Virtues of the "Old Historicism"

A good example of the limits of cultural criticism as a means of social reconstruction is apparent in the rise of "new historicism" as a critical movement. Distinguishing itself from earlier historically-oriented criticism, new historicists dismiss these "old historicists" for their supposed presentation of "a neutral or unproblematic context against which to interpret [problematic] literary texts."³ The problem supposedly is that old historicists paid no heed to the suppression of subaltern classes and social groups which are now the stuff of new historicist criticism. This is a valid point. On the other hand, as problematic as this old historicist approach was, it also permitted a kind of engagement with political events and socio-economic realities that we have now lost in cultural studies.⁴ And though the historical past was simplified – in order, I suppose, to find a ground for the Anglo-American myth – old historicists

2 Quotation drawn from Paul Christensen, "Conference Proposal: The Re-Mythologizing of America," for a conference held at the University of Oslo, May 3-4, 1997.

3 Richard Grusin, "Introduction [New American Studies in Science and Technology]," *Configurations* 3 (1995), pp. 349-51.

4 American Studies has increasingly followed a cultural studies approach. My preference is that American Studies should draw on cultural discourses and read them in relation to geography, world systems theory, urban planning and history.

avoided what Murray Krieger calls an over-powering and acidic "hermeneutics of suspicion" so common to literary and cultural criticism today.⁵ Rather than interminable subversion, old historicists like Alfred Kazin sought, as Giles Gunn puts it, "out of admiration, or at least out of hope, to salvage and recuperate the past."⁶ Robert Westbrook argues that the cultural criticisms posed by many of us today often end up, by contrast, as a "deeply quiescent invitation to conceive of ours as a repressive culture with no exit and no genuinely critical resources of its own."⁷

In *On Native Grounds* Alfred Kazin recovers some of those resources for his time. One of his themes concerns the efforts of journalists, WPA writers and critics in the 1930s and 1940s to "recover America as [*a unifying*] idea." The foundation of this mythic impulse, Kazin asserts, was the response to the Great Depression itself: "Out of a decade of unrelieved crisis and failure, out of the desire to assess what could be known and to establish a needed security in the American inheritance, came the realization of how little American writing had served the people and how little it had come to grips with the subject at hand – the country itself."⁸ For Kazin the literature of the 1930s was grounded in the crisis of society and represented a resource that permitted the re-imagining of American life. And when in the 1940s this re-imagining of America turned into an admittedly shallow and "unabashed recovery of an American mythology," this too, Kazin says, was an understandable response to historical events.

"Old Historicism" Re-Historicized

The re-visioning of America was complete by the end of the war. The American myth and its ideological companion, American exceptionalism, were re-instituted.⁹ Having carried out significant internal reforms

5 Murray Krieger, *The Institution of Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994).

6 Quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, "A New Pragmatism," Review of *Thinking across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism*, by Giles Gunn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) in *American Quarterly* 45 (September 1993): pp. 438-444, 442.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 442.

8 Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956; orig. pub., 1942), pp. 398, 381.

and then having fought off the world-wide threat of fascism, "America" was re-legitimized. Under such historical circumstances, it was not unbelievable or sentimental for a critic like Kazin to acknowledge a certain validity in "the emotional discovery of America the country that once more became, as Jefferson had long ago said, 'this government: the world's best last hope'."¹⁰

But as John L. Thomas makes clear the literary and imaginative and critical responses to the crises of this era did not reflect unproblematic political responses. The re-mythologizing of America during the New Deal period actually began as a critical cultural studies centered around ideas and visions of regionalism.¹¹ But by the late 1930s these regionalisms were truncated in response to the crisis of civilization brought on by the fascist regimes. Regionalists like Lewis Mumford and Van Wyck Brooks became nationalists.

Thomas provides us with an interesting point about the relationship between literature, criticism and society. What emerged through the literary and critical imagination – a more particularist, specifically regionalist representation of America – neither determined, nor mirrored the dominant political discourse. In the political environment of the 1930s, characterized by demands for State centralization and economic planning, regionalism was made to serve nationalist ends: the Works Progress Administration (WPA) rebuilt the national infrastructure, at the same time that WPA artists struggled to give expression to the regional traditions and possibilities of the landscapes and cityscapes effected by reconstruction. But by the early 1940s, the force of events set off by the international political crisis overwhelmed the pragmatic validity of “re-

9 Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," *American Quarterly* 45 (March 1993): 29. When America was first mythologized as an exceptional nation it was understood as having defeated "history": to have become an exception to the rule of power (later understood as the conflict of class) that seemed to define the narrow parameters of modern history. The exceptionalist myth was used for explicitly ideological reasons during the Gilded Age where it emerged in the discourse of "Americanization" which, among other uses, justified scientific management and business unionism. With the temporary collapse of what Van Wyck Brooks called "a business civilization" in 1929, there was a real opening for a critical challenge to established notions of American identity. See also the special issue of *American Studies* in *Scandinavia* on exceptionalism, 29:2 (Fall, 1997).

10 Kazin, p. 394.

11 John L. Thomas, "The Uses of Catastrophism: Lewis Mumford, Vernon L. Parrington, Van Wyck Brooks, and the End of American Regionalism," *American Quarterly* 42 (June 1990): pp. 223-251.

gionalist cultural representations" and helped establish a cultural nationalism which would grow ever more strident during the Cold War era.

Postmodern Responses

Little wonder that Alan Trachtenberg has pointed out that postmodern cultural studies has sought to avoid cultural nationalism and parochialism by staying "resolutely focused on dissolving all ideologies, on uncovering and denying all structures of power hidden within cultural symbolologies."¹² But as this postmodern project, the de-mythologizing of America, proceeds, it both reflects and contributes to the destabilizing of social identities and the delegitimizing of the (national) state.¹³ Postmodernism makes the case for particularities (ethnic, gender, racial), by arguing that the notion of a common historical project is merely a construction built on a meta-narrative which ruthlessly suppresses particularity. This oppositional perspective makes framing politics – and politics requires, after all, the ability to imagine how power could be wielded – impossible. "We" are left with an oppositional stance: the new buzz words are "local knowledge" and "from below," which in theory may become part of a new politics. But the very form by which such "knowledge" is conceived – that is, as oppositional, negative and entirely subjective – makes it irrelevant to the process of turning local knowledges into political opposition which can be organized to wield actual power. Is this postmodern stance so different from the old romantic notion of cultural transformation, "the idea that spiritual transformation must precede – or even displace – social revolution...“?¹⁴

12 Trachtenberg, foreword to Casey Blake, *Beloved Community* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1990).

13 In "The Idiocy of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 43 (1991): pp. 625-660, 652, Steven Watts argues that postmodern politics do not really challenge mainstream American culture, which is built on "an interlocking network of corporate liberal politics, consumer capitalism, bureaucratic social structures, and a therapeutic ethic of personality growth and self-realization."

14 Blake, *Beloved Community*, p. 35, mentions precedents going back to Emerson and Thoreau, Blake and Tolstoy.

The Political Inadequacies of Postmodern Responses

Today the politics of the monied professional class grows in the space created by the de-mythologizing of America. The basic (political) problem with recent moves to include more voices, a necessary part of the process of reconstruction, is that the resulting multiplicity of cultural representations are often celebrated as a triumph of democratic expression, obscuring the fact that participation in the real decision-making processes is being simultaneously contracted. We have a growing crisis of inequality in western societies, a social world increasingly divided between the privileged educated class and everyone else. The crisis is rooted in the economic responses to the stagnation of industrial economies that began in the early 1970s. One result (perhaps even, purpose) of the post-1973 restructuring, which began with deregulation and proceeded with the shrinking of the welfare state, was to impose market discipline on recalcitrant populations inside the United States. Another consequence is that relative to privileged groups, the majority of the population has suffered a decline in their standard of living. Rising inequality presents a grim prospect for a free society.

The politics of our era, as they've emerged in the US, seems to me to rest on an odd symbiosis between a liberal cultural politics and a reactionary social politics – perhaps best seen in the issue of African-American identity and the black vote. Some multiculturalists want political boundaries and modes of representation to be drawn along racial lines. The resulting black districts find approval among conservatives as a way to culturally isolate African-Americans. Identity politics – the most visible form of postmodern politics around – no longer contests the established center of power. This center of power was identified as early as the 1820s by Andrew Jackson, who understood the power of organized money in American society, and the possibility that through political organization ordinary people could contest that power. The argument that organized politics, the traditional contest between organized money versus organized people, could be superseded by the politics of identity has an uncanny similarity to the 1950s liberal end of ideology school.¹⁵

15 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960)

The argument went something like this: The central issue of western politics since the Renaissance has been the distribution of wealth; the triumph of reason is the elimination of the distribution problem, ending the need for old ideologies and opening new political directions which will be based on the interactions of different interest-groups. It seems to me that the implications of identity politics assume that these structures – the alleviation of scarcity and the efficacy of interest-group politics – are in place. They're not.

Reassertion of Old Politics?

Issues of distribution have burst back on the scene and are likely to become an increasingly important aspect of American and world social systems. For a while this was the staple of fading social democratic intellectuals, but ever since Kevin Phillips published *The Politics of Rich and Poor* in 1990 questions of wealth distribution have become a mainstream issue.¹⁶ Though Phillips' book was too narrow in its analysis, fitting recent events entirely into the history of American politics, it did much to re-open the issue of economic justice for public discussion. Consequently, we are seeing, among other things, a revival of muck-raking, a sure indication of middle-class angst. More importantly, a surprising re-reading of American history has emerged among a few public intellectuals. One of the most interesting is offered by Michael Lind, who advocates ignoring cultural politics altogether, in order to reassert a new version of liberal nationalism as the best hope to deal with issues of distribution and fragmentation.¹⁷

Lind's *The Next American Nation* is a very convincing book for two reasons: it effectively counters multicultural myths about the persistence

16 Barry Bluestone & Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrializing of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment & the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (New York: Random House, 1990).

17 Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

of ethnic pluralism with hard evidence about intermarriage and other signs of a continuing Americanization process that encompasses the majority of the population. The purpose of retrieving the "melting pot" is to recover an American national character and identity. Second, Lind combines a frank assessment of the "overclass" – the professional and managerial class – with a hopeful re-reading of American history: his call for a "fourth republic" is an attempt to reassert the liberal state at the center of a national polity committed to correcting the inequalities of the capitalist system.

It's interesting that both Lind and Phillips call for the resurgence of a (very mild) reformist Left on the model of middle class progressivism and that both of these commentators began on the political right (Lind has more fully renounced his rightist credentials). Have they changed their political perspectives or is there a reason why conservatives would advocate this position? One answer to this question comes in the form of a statement made by the Marxist historical geographer, Immanuel Wallerstein, in his essay, *Capitalist Civilization*. Wallerstein points out that prior to its breakdown amidst the triumph of market ideology in the 1980s, the Left, in all its manifestations (the socialist states, the national liberation movements of the third world, and the Keynesian-social democratic systems of the advanced world) constituted a force for adjustment and legitimation of the world economic system. Consequently, he says: "From the point of view of the capitalist world-system, this collapse of left strategy has been a disaster, since far from being revolutionary the classical left strategy has served as part of the integrating glue of capitalist civilization."¹⁸ Phillips and Lind are traditionalists hoping that yesteryear's reformism can restore the luster – that is to say the legitimacy – of the national State in hopes of preserving the system.

18 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 151.

Lasch: Populist Traditionalism, Pragmatism and History

Christopher Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites*, shares something with Phillips' and Land's work: he wants to recover an American past. But the past he admires is not that of mainstream American politics. Party politics is irrelevant, he asserts, because the traditional left-right spectrum cannot address the fundamental issues of personality and culture with which we are confronted. We suffer from a fragmentation of the (collective) personality. Lasch's conservatism is expressed in his fundamental critique of the myth of progress and "growth," the foundation for most modern ideologies, including liberalism and Marxism.¹⁹ Economic growth and ecological destruction, he argues, are the necessary accompaniments to a collective personality rooted in "progress" and the therapeutic adjustment to a capitalist consumer culture. Lasch objects to the transition from the nineteenth-century conception of "character" to twentieth-century therapeutic culture, with its shibboleth of personal growth. But he offers us much more than criticism. Lasch's re-reading of American history, with attention to the question of structures of power and the movements opposed to them, makes it possible to look at the American past and see resources of hope in the idea of civic individualism, in the history of populism and aspects of the labor movement.

Lasch reveals history through moments of decision. Choices existed; decisions were made. History in this sense concerns values and modes of representation, but it also raises what C. Wright Mills calls "the basic problem of power": "the problem of who is involved in making [decision~]. With his attention to the alternative politics of the American past – in particular republican and populist political traditions, Lasch suggests that conceptions of politics and culture long since forgotten offer important insights and critical perspective on our current situation. But in other respects, his work is troubling not only because he seems in tone to reject the present, but also because his own pre-modern assault on modernity undermines what in other moments is Lasch's – and I must

¹⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: Norton, 1991); *The Revolt of the Elites* (New York: Norton, 1995).

²⁰ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 40.

add my own – greatest hope, that of finding a cultural criticism and a politics capable of pragmatically re-assessing current social and political arrangements in line, at least in part, with the following prescription offered by Mills: "what chances, if any, [do] men [and women] of different positions in differing types of society have, first, by their reason and experience, to transcend their everyday milieu, and second, by virtue of their power, to act with consequence for the structure of their society and their periods [of time]. These are the problems of the role of reason in history."²¹

21 Ibid., pp. 184-185