

Why is American popular culture so popular? A view from Europe

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The reversed baseball cap

One of the roving reporters of the German TV channel, ARD, went to Siberia for an exploration of uncharted territories and noncommodified folk. First he flew with Aeroflot from Moscow to Siberia, then he traveled by boat to the end of the Siberian river system. There he took a bus inland to the end of that line, and finally he set off for the final leg of the trip in a Lada jeep. After days of travel, demonstrating in passing that the etymology of travel derives from travail, his team arrived at a settlement close to the Arctic Sea, home to a tribe of circumpolar Tungusians known to ethnologists for their bearskin rituals. How do these indigenous people manage to cope in the post-Soviet era? He wanted to find out for the benefit of the TV audiences back home. When he opened the door of the community store the camera man caught a primordial scene: a grandfather with his grandchild on his knee. The grandfather was dressed in Tungusian garments, the grandchild had on its head – a reversed baseball cap.¹

1. John David Smith suggests that the juvenile habit of reversing the baseball cap may be linked to the catcher's role in American baseball. Baseball never was a popular sport in Europe or Siberia, yet the reversed baseball cap is everywhere. It is more likely that it emerged from inner city black culture. According to *Fortune Magazine* a New York advertizing agency videotaped bedrooms of teenagers in 25 countries: it was hard to tell whether the rooms were in America, Europe or Asia (Tully).

Why is American vernacular culture so popular? Why are American goods so attractive, why are New World protagonists so mythogenic, why are its icons and genres so adaptive, why are its rhetorics and vernaculars so catching and why are its ritual transgressions so captivating for audiences all over the world? And what would explain that cultural Americanophilia may well coexist with political Americanophobia (Watson)? Can the successful tease of American commodities be blamed on manipulation and post-Cold-War hegemony alone? Hardly. Their seductive quality was felt long before the American century was in place.² But why have previous critics of commodification all but disappeared at the postmodern and postfordist moment when the new and improved cargo of goods represents our only choice in the global department store? Clearly, we should not ignore the global reach of American dollar diplomacy and of Yankee marketing skills. Their global impact and long-range effects are clearly visible today when American-style late capitalism is the "only game in town" (Gray). And yet, Jacque Lang's soundbyte "cultural imperialism" would not do. It is ruled out as too self-serving and condescending by the many discriminating users of American culture among whom we count ourselves.³ Even Lang closed that chapter when he pinned a medal on Sylvester Stallone's breast.

The following answer is grounded in a European perspective. Indeed it simulates a "studied" European gaze upon America in the tradition of de Tocqueville, Bryce and Myrdal that would identify what is different, if not *exceptional* about it.⁴ My initial thesis is simple: the ideological constructions and historical experiences that have inspired an American exception-

2. I owe the title of my paper to Todd Gitlin whose lecture at the Amerika Institut in the summer of 1995 prompted me to develop a set of European answers to the question. Manuela Thurner, Martin Christadler, John David Smith, Maren Stange and Ulla Haselstein offered helpful criticism. Such sterling advice has not eliminated imperfections.

3. Each age cohort in post-war Germany was convinced that, while their members use American commodities with discrimination and taste, the younger generations are caving in to Americanization.

4. Inevitably these ruminations are also part of a bicultural argument which has been running in my head since as a young exchange student I stepped off the Zephyr in East-Dubuque forty-two years ago – an internal dialogue about transatlantic similarities and differences, exceptionalisms and *Sonderwege*, but also about respective blind spots, cognitive traps and comfortable stereotypes. On this *folie à deux*: B. Ostendorf. "Some Contradictions in the Americanization-of-Germany Debate," in Elliott Shore and Frank Trommler, ed. *Being Present in the Other Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books 2000. The bibliography lists an inordinate number of my own publications which signals a lack of humility. I quote them as an extension of the arguments of this paper.

alism also propel its popular and commercial culture (Appleby). Before we begin speculating on the invisible hands that reversed the Tungusian baseball cap, it may therefore be helpful to delineate the encompassing design of American popular culture production and understand its success *at home* in order to better comprehend the workings of its representational and commodified tease abroad.

I. An American Popular Culture

The terms “popular” and “culture” of the title require a transatlantic differentiation. Quite early a cognitive difference emerged between the political rhetoric of the young republic and the King’s English with far-reaching consequences for the development of both high and popular cultures on either side of the Atlantic.⁵ The difference had to do with a revolutionary semantic change. The new American political and economic order was based on a *popular* mandate, not on a feudal order or on religious estates. Although the exercise of political power remained for a good while in the hands of gentlemen of property and standing, a class to which the Founding Fathers belonged, popular culture rode to its victory on the coattails of republican *self government* and *popular sovereignty*.⁶ This difference revolutionized not only the political, but also the cultural order and redirected, in the long run, the semantic undertow of important key words, among them “popular” and “culture.”⁷

In his dictionary of 1755 the English lexicographer Dr. Johnson had

5. It is not the aim of this paper to define the generic boundaries of high, popular and mass culture, nor to differentiate or historicize its subsectors such as subculture, counterculture, youth culture nor to comment on the disappearance of normative markers between high, popular or mass culture in postmodernism. Instead I will focus on the enabling parameters that have made various sectors of American culture so popular. Cf. Jameson and Kuper for a discussion of the political contradictions in the uses of “culture.”

6. Dietmar Herz comments on the elective affinity between American popular and political cultures in *Die Wohlerzogene Republik. Das konstitutionelle Denken des politisch-philosophischen Liberalismus*. Paderborn: Schoeningh Verlag 1999, 335.

7. European observers gave the young American Republic a few years before it would go belly up. But the American system has shown a remarkable resiliency, longevity and adaptability. Michael Kammen’s image of a machine that would go of itself is fitting, but the metaphor essentializes qualities that should be unraveled historically.

likened popularity to the mob to prostitution and contagious diseases, and he quotes Dryden to the effect that "a popular man is in truth no better than a prostitute to common fame and to the people." With the American revolution a radical semantic reversal with far reaching political consequences was ushered in. For in the young republic the word "popular" had a post-revolutionary and *American* legitimacy. In short, the notion of the popular became the cornerstone of a New World political indigenization. This fact was duly recorded in the first dictionary that recorded the new differences between American and English. In the 1828 edition of his *American Dictionary of the English Language* Noah Webster makes a telling use of Johnson's entry which involves a self-conscious act of distancing from Old World meanings. Webster does not question Johnson's authority as a lexicographer. Therefore he quotes his sample sentences verbatim, but then he begs to differ: "Not in the US"! In the U.S., he avers, the term "popular" celebrates the achievements of popular sovereignty and hence refers to the will and wisdom of the common man. And the latter, he adds with a nod to the doctor, includes a large portion of the educated elite. Webster's politically motivated, inclusive understanding of the concept of the popular helps to explain why class division, though it clearly existed as a social fact, never got off to a good start in the *heads* of common Americans. It simply lacked a figurative semantic space. To be sure there were rich and poor *citizens* in the young republic, but no divisive social boundaries would henceforth be attached to the notion of the popular.⁸ The fact that Americans continue to be hazy about matters of class may well have to do with the early indigenization of the popular as a basis of a social egalitarianism which would in due time also affect the notion of culture.

The key term "culture" settled into an American semantic context later in the century. Ralph Waldo Emerson in *The American Scholar* had already hoped for "the gradual domestication of the idea of culture." (Kammen, xi). In marked contrast to Europe a decidedly egalitarian sense, made popular first by anthropologists such as Franz Boas, was spread out in Kroeber and Kluckhohn's notorious compendium. Culture, defined within the semantic space of a populist and progressive political

8. When the wine waiter at Stratford St. Mary recommended a bottle to Randolph Churchill on the grounds of its popularity the latter bellowed: "What makes you think I want to drink anything *popular*?"

culture, constituted a “pragmatic charter of behavior.” The popular front of the Thirties chimed in and claimed that culture was “ordinary” and that it expressed “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group.” Progressivism and Marxism gave it a grand narrative embrace and defined it as economic and political praxis *tout court* (Bauman). Over time this progressive and marxisante, anthropological understanding of culture found a ready home in America since it implied a de-hierarchization of European concepts of the political orders and their culture-based legitimation. America was not a “Kulturnation” as was Germany, a self-identification that gave rise to the typical German put-down of America as “kulturlos.” The French seconded with numerous books on New World “decline” from Cornelius DePauw to Jean Baudrillard. According to the New World political undertow *all citizens* are embedded in a pragmatic charter of behavior and everyone is therefore involved in cultural praxis. Of course this egalitarian sweep excluded those who were not voting citizens; for, typically, inequality hinged on access to citizenship, not on access to culture. Hence the deepest cleavage in American culture remained, as W.E.B. DuBois had it, the exclusionary color line. Since the early logic of state was political, the young republic in marked contrast to European nations did not have to formulate a “cultural policy” for the purpose of defining the union.⁹ Where then rested cultural authority? With those who had political authority – not the privileged few, but “we the people,” those who had the vote. This non-national grounding of culture allowed its egalitarian citizens to ‘cultivate’ the plural differences in lifestyles between a variety of peoples and to make these “figurable.” Under these more or less egalitarian circumstances cultural difference was in fact culture-producing. For, one side-effect of practical pluralism enhanced by the free exercise and anti-establishment clauses of the First Amendment was that the pragmatic need for tolerance toward otherness and the lack of a national cultural agenda would in the long run atrophy the normative or doctrinal nature of all difference whether religious or cultural. Disestablishment and tolerance of free exercise converged to disarm the political clout of what in Europe Freud had deplored as the narcissism of minor differ-

9. Instead it invested civic culture with a religious purpose and created an American “Civil Religion.”

ences. In Europe small cultural difference could be politically deadly. In America the *right* to be different was a leveler, it amounted over time to an *Aufhebung* of cultural difference. The disestablishment of cultural normativity had an important consequence: the emerging nineteenth-century enterprise of popular culture had, relatively speaking, a free and level playing field – no “normative traditions” as in Europe, no established cultural custodians and no powerful state could impede its growth.

With these semantic provisos in mind an archeological dig into the historical sedimentations of the American experience will help to answer the question of the economic success, adaptability and social stability of American popular culture production. It will also explain how these advantages buttressed the energizing dynamism of American *performance styles* over time. Indeed by identifying popular sovereignty as the sociopolitical engine and disestablishment as an empowering, stabilizing force of the encompassing cultural project, we have a first and preliminary answer to our question: the success of American popular culture lies not in any one of its individual formal or aesthetic properties, but in its *overall design* which is that of a consciously constructed, liberal, and *popular* New World utopia. This utopia materializes and manifests itself first and foremost as the first radical, unimpeded market economy which set free, as Joyce Appleby has shown, remarkable entrepreneurial energies of common people. This propulsive energy of New World popular culture production – this will be the most comprehensive answer – may best be explained along the lines of an American exceptionalism folded into a neo-liberal market economy that has after the end of the Cold War become a global force. Whether the classic claims of an American exceptionalism are spurious or legitimate, mythical or real is beside the point. What counts is how and why it works – at home and now around the world – in making the commodities of this cultural market so exceptionally successful.

Since the logic of the American system vests all political authority in the basically egalitarian sovereign “we the people,” the state or nation pursues no cultural project of its own. The absence of a national cultural purpose does not mean that the liberal arena or “free” market in which cultural production occurs and the public sphere in which its meanings are negotiated are a level playing field or a neutral ground; instead all popular cultures, whether countercultural, regional, ethnic, subcultural,

middle class or hegemonic, are bound up with existing power structures and are tied into social and political struggle. Throughout the ages, Bernhard Fabian tells us, marshaling much African evidence, popular culture was used by the weak, the marginalized and powerless as an instrument to carve out spaces or "moments of freedom" (Fabian). Again the American story diverges from European models and follows its own logic. Fabian's understanding of popular-as-adversarial is accurate for highly stratified societies with a strong establishment, either court, clergy or bourgeoisie, in place. In such stratified settings, as Roger Chartier notes, the notion of the popular emerged as a "category of the learned" (Chartier), or, *pace* Johnson, as a defensive label of the ruling classes for the socially other. Into the term "popular" the European ruling order packed all its hostile, condescending or nostalgic perceptions of the licentious and dangerous classes. In the U.S., however, where popular culture rested on the consent of the governed, the concept of the popular lacked these projections, as Webster noted. And the guarantee of free speech made, at least in theory, Dr. Johnson's class-bound fear of a dissenting or licentious mob quite unnecessary. Indeed, later grass roots populism would become one of the driving forces in American politics, left or right. What has been most confusing for European observers was the fact that the articulation of dissent enjoyed a popular legitimation. It was part and parcel of that early myth of consensus and hence integral to the working of its system. In short, for an important semantic marker of the political rhetoric of the young republic the charges were reversed. In the U.S. not the concept of a popular, but that of an elite culture emerged as a hostile category of Jacksonian common man, and it filled an adversarial slot within a middling, contentious and egalitarian democracy. Indeed, high culture began in the U.S. with a legitimation crisis and stands to this day under potential "Ideologieverdacht" (Twitchell). In keeping with its precarious social position the high culture of the American Renaissance internalized antinomian tendencies which in turn acculturated a certain populist streak and set the later stage for the "legitimation of the subversive," as Lionel Trilling put it forty years ago. England, where popular culture was associated with subaltern, dangerous and insurgent movements, gave us the Birmingham school of cultural studies with its class-based theory of popular culture. In Johnson's England Popular Culture Studies would develop into a displaced substitute for

Marxism, as Fredric Jameson quips (Jameson 1995). It was bound into the saga of a class struggle against those above. With the emergence of new class divisions during industrialization America imported the rhetoric of class, but most American "class struggles" have ended in a new commercial balance. And American popular culture may have had something to do with it. Particularly when articulating dissent, popular culture has tended – in the long run – to reinforce and stabilize the basically exceptional logic and the immanence of the American system. Werner Sombart's answer to the question of why there is no socialism in America was that it shipwrecked on apple pie and steak. I would argue that it failed to crack open the immanent stability of the American system, and instead was absorbed and coopted by it while the system itself adjusted to the new challenges. Dissent is a legitimate, even necessary, part of a system of checks and balances. Indeed, the system learns from such dissent. Any citizen may criticize the system from within in order to improve its problem solving capacity, but should not cross the frontier into the world of an "alien" and "un-American" disloyalty. The basic loyalty to the constantly learning system is also the litmus test of an American exceptionalism. Hence the dialectical relationship between hegemonic power and popular culture is contained *within the U.S.* and hence is marked by more complicated, even contradictory, political shifts and social reversals depending on time and place than in Europe with its more radical and system-breaking ideological cleavages. It is remarkable that the American Constitution outlasted a series of European constitutional revolutions in France, Germany and Italy. A key term here is the quintessentially American notion of a "realignment" to adjust what Huntington called its promise of disharmony or the "IVI-gap," between ideals and institutions. A second notion is that of cooptation and inclusion, which allows what Hollinger calls "the widening the circle of we," i.e. the circle of rights and of commodities, of citizens and of consumption.

Are there not examples of popular culture in the U.S., say in the sixties, that could be called adversarial or subversive? Certainly, but these have less to do with their popular than their ethnic or particularist provenance and are driven by indigenous, subcultural, traditional, but rarely by popular motives. Popular energy has often attacked inequities and faults within the system, but rarely challenged its logic or wanted to. Popular cultural energy may well arise in an adversarial spirit and proceed to

hijack the signs and symbols of everyday life. It may then purposely displace icons of power into new, regional, ethnic or countercultural frames of reference (Frank). It is hardly an accident that Herbert Marcuse formulated his notion of "repressive tolerance" in the U.S. Though the term was sometimes misunderstood as a calculated hegemonic strategy it does capture the uncanny ability of the two-pronged American liberalism to domesticate difference, commodify ethnic particularism and incorporate political dissent (Zelizer, Frank). Indeed, the free exercise of self-critical dissent, particularly the jeremiadic kind, of which American popular culture literally overflows, is one of the quasi-foundational American habits of the heart (Shiffrin) which tends in the long run to reinforce the immanence of its system.¹⁰

As this article will argue, it is misleading to read the situative hijacking of signifiers that American popular culture ritually engages in as a adversarial or destabilizing strategy. It makes more sense to see it as a constant *realignment and expansion* of the American system, helping to buttress both its political and cultural order by the cooptation of dissent. The tacit background assumption of the system of checks and balances, as James Madison understood it, was the realignment of creedal passions of a free people, hence it worked toward the harmony of an ever larger system. The cumulative effect of the emerging popular culture is the creation of a multiculturally seasoned culture industry, which is quite as systemic as are the liberal utopias which inspire it. Madison, Jay and Hamilton created the political basis for a unique dream machine that would go of itself.

And yet, Jacque Lang's knee-jerk reaction is understandable. When observed from outside the U.S., American popular culture appears first

10. Stuart Hall's warning that popular culture constitutes not only an arena of resistance, but also of consent, is in the American case of singular relevance. The transformative power of the American system, that of turning dissent, be it cultural or political, into economic consent is from a European angle remarkable and exceptional (Storey, 160). Even the discipline of Cultural Studies is affected by such a transatlantic commodification. Since America in the words of Richard Hofstadter does not have ideologies, but is one, all un-American "ideologies" or religions, when transported to America, are disarmed and rendered doctrinally weak by the dis-establishment clause of the First Amendment which says "Thou shalt not establish ruling doctrines besides Americanism." In the popular front period of the New Deal Marxists tried to pass off communism as the better Americanism. The transatlantic passage of British Cultural Studies to America has resulted in a subtle process of depoliticization (Ostendorf, 1995b).

and foremost as a commodified industry. However wrong Adorno may have been about an individual item such as jazz (which he confused with popular music), his verdict holds that American popular culture as a total project and as an industry when seen from the outside tends to be as immanent and stable as the political culture which supports it (Adorno/Horkheimer).¹¹ Moments and spaces of freedom are possible, but these are caught in the webs of a much larger economic design which pursues its own policy and inexorable, one-dimensional logic. This is particularly true of those segments of popular culture that, after surviving in a competitive market, have become an economic success and have entered a consolidation phase of professionalization and commodification. Indeed, the assumption that the ritualized transgression of Rock'n' Roll or of Ice-T's rap are inherently "radical" or "transgressive" may turn out to be one of the chief miscalculations of the Popular Culture Studies cohort (Ostendorf 1995b, Frank, *passim*).

If from a non-American perspective we take for granted that hegemony of the culture industry and the entrepreneurial reach or imperial design of its commodities, it ought to be all the more puzzling why its icons and ritual transgressions are so popular among the down and out in other countries. What explains the magical power of their representational tease? For "even people who are being shamefully abused by the emerging global system yearn for what it seems to promise them," William Greider writes with a sense of wonder (Rosenblatt, 30). The answer lies in the nature of that design which combines an individualized promise of liberation to customers with the stability of an immanent belief system. While popular culture has never been identical or coterminous with this design, it has received its vital energies from it. Let us first look at what Perry Miller called the "innermost propulsion" of the "American Creed" and figure out how its dynamic logic has rendered its culture so popular.

11. There is a renewed interest in the problem and process of commodification. James W. Cook, in a review of Bluford Adams' *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman & the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, Minneapolis, 1997 rightly insists that we must understand "Barnum's exhibitions, institutions and celebrity as market-driven, publicly-consumed commodities, each one carefully managed by the showman..." and, one might add, by the author of "The Art of Money-Getting." "Mass Marketing and Cultural History: The Case of P.T. Barnum," *American Quarterly* 51,1 (March 1999), 175-186.

II. American Popular Culture: A Pragmatic Charter of Behavior

Rule of law & habeas corpus. The deepest layer of the American creed holds the tradition of the rule of law and of *habeas corpus*. The American dissidents attacked the British king for the breach of these "ancient English rights." The royal breach legitimized their secession that created the Republic: a truly foundational act of resistance. Thomas Paine put it well: the "king as law" was replaced by the "rule of law" (Rogin, 82), thus radically redefining the notion of a body politic. To wit, the rule of law entered the American design of a well-run republic on a consenting *and* dissenting note that proved to be effective in the creation of individual legal self-confidence and of rights talk. The belief in the rule of law and, subsequently, in legal proceduralism was democratized and popularized in the early Republic (Wood). It has over time given to America six times more lawyers per capita than France, three times more than Germany, and, in combination with an individualized sense of tort and the privatization of punitive damages, has fed a hungry culture of litigation. Each year American law schools produce more lawyers than the total number of legal professionals working in Japan (Lipset, 49-50). Perry Miller observed the "rise of a legal mentality" in his *The Life of the Mind in America* (1965) and Lawrence M. Friedman claims with some justice that "life in modern America ... is a vast, diffuse school of law" (Papke, 3).

The national preoccupation with the rule of law has energized the iconography and narratives of popular culture in myriad ways (Porsdam). The important role of the court as a narrative arena is apparent in the Western, as is the prominence of the rhetoric of juridical proceduralism in its plots. The choreography of the classic western pivots on the boundary line between legal and extralegal territories and behaviors, and its ethos supports the right of the individual to break when necessary "bad" law and to take the "good" law into his own hands. Court scenes are constitutive of its plots, and the sheriff has over time become a regular of national central casting. Lynch law, when inspired by racial presuppositions, charts the dark and violent side of such legalistic entitlements on the fault line between civilization and wilderness, or between law and order.

In our time American television has developed any number of court dramas and court sitcoms, most notably Perry Mason. The eager participation of the American public in the legal proceduralism of the O.J. Simpson trial and in the legal hairsplitting in the Monica Lewinsky affair

have baffled European audiences. Since Monicagate CNN has run a program called "The Burden of Proof" which is exclusively concerned with procedural questions.¹² And other such popular programs keep cropping up at regular intervals (Judge Judy, Divorce Court, Moral Court, Judge Hatchet). How may one explain the exceptional status of the justices of the American Supreme Court as public figures? In Europe the names of chief justices are not generally known, and few people know what they actually do. The appointment of American chief justices constitutes a political event of the first order, as the failed nomination of Judge Bork or the appointment of Clarence Thomas have demonstrated. Key social anxieties such as the so-called "aids scare" are domesticated and regulated by running them through a legal register as in the film "Philadelphia." Only in America could two law professors Paul Bergman and Michael Asimov write a handbook for law movie buffs, *Reel Justice*. They list more than 110 box office courtroom films, not counting B-movies or Westerns. They rate them by assigning one to four gavels, not for their quality as films, but for their accuracy of legal analysis and of trial practice (Bergman/Asimov). There is a vast popular audience for the daily practice of the rule of law.

The story of how law and popular culture mesh would not be complete without a strong dissenting tradition, a legal heresy movement, that found an "undue respect for law" misguided and even dangerous. It too goes back to the founding myths which after the Declaration of Independence were buttressed by a strong suspicion of any central power. Henry David Thoreau called for a civil disobedience based on individual conscience and found that the instruments of legal proceduralism were concentrated in the hands of the powerful and corrupt. What one may call the lack-of-faith-tradition was carried on by various radical groups into the new century, and found a strong revival in the Civil Rights and Black movements. Legalism was a tool in the hands of white suppressors, said the Black Pan-

12. TV court dramas have not been as easily exportable to continental Europe as have other sitcoms, but they are now run on commercial channels. U.S. Circuit Judge Alex Kozinski recalls his fascination as an immigrant to America in 1963 watching *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) where Henry Fonda who plays the lone dissenting voice in a jury of twelve manages to turn the verdict around. Kozinski decided to go for a career in law (Bergman/Asimov, xvii-xviii). The spirit of law in the German TV series "Derrick" rests in a paternalistic and patriarchal police officer, the juridical equivalent of Helmut Kohl. "Derrick's" predecessor was known as "Der Alte," a name the public used for Adenauer. Not surprisingly the series is popular in China and Japan.

thers, and “the system” readily obliged by providing cases to prove it. The Rodney King trial made visible these skeletons in the closets of a corrupt system as does the on-going case of Abu Mumia Jamal on death-row. One would in fact suspect that a lack of faith in the rule of law ought to characterize the marginalized, ghettoized and forgotten minorities. Not necessarily. In the courtroom of the public they too used the instruments of the rule of law to be heard and counted. Patricia Williams records that despite their experience as victims of a racist legal practice, the black folk have kept alive a “semi-religious source of hope,” that grounds in the abstract “rights-talk” of the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation (Porsdam, 16). On the other side of the political spectrum right-wing organizations and militias seem today less obsessed with guns than with laws. There is a right-wing subculture of proceduralist rights talk, a constitutional fundamentalism defending personal liberties against an encroaching “system” be it the federal state or a world conspiracy called ZOG (Zionist Occupational Government). And at both extremes such rights talk is folded into the rhetoric of patriotism. Indeed, it is the strong emphasis on *personalized rights* as a defense against centralized tyranny which has fired the popular and patriotic imagination of common Americans. And this promise of legal empowerment of the lone individual is heard – through the agency of American films – not only in the US but all over the world. The Soviet dissident Joseph Brodsky relates that his conversion to Western civil rights came after watching German language versions of American Tarzan and Zorro films in Soviet Russia. The Soviets had confiscated this contraband after the war in Berlin and had released the films with Russian subtitles on the assumption that they were too trivial to matter. But according to Brodsky they carried the message of the heroic struggle of individual fighters against collective oppression into the hearts of many young Russians.¹³ According to the London *Observer* Serbian students were arrested, manhandled and beaten by Belgrade riot police and, to add insult to injury, were given a mock trial. When one of the students asked for a defense lawyer he was told: “you have been watching too many American movies” (Gitlin, 1992). Such liberal dreams of the rule of law are highly exportable to beleaguered individuals all around the world.

13. Personal communication from Werner Sollors.

The Beloved "Moral" Community. The second archeological layer of the American belief system holds the idea of a protestant-republican beloved community that was conceived in the spirit of a morally sanctioned dissent and subsequently stabilized by voluntary associations of like-minded individuals. The Mayflower Compact of 1620 provided the model for a voluntaristic communitarian contract of dissenters. The idea of a voluntary and hence beloved moral community constitutes a strong fibre of the American social fabric spun by John Winthrop on the "Arabella" in 1630, a vested interest in community and in a "civill body politick" which, though forever in crisis, is alive and well today (Smelser & Alexander, 1999). Indeed, the current discourses loosely called "communitarianism" are popular reactions to the alleged or real decline of community or of voluntarism using the rhetoric of the jeremiad and the strategies of quasi-religious mobilization.¹⁴ Civic-mindedness and the sense of public stewardship of the moral individual are the civic or social capital accumulated according to the biblical adage: "where much is given, much is demanded." The Protestant heritage of individual accountability adds a moral component to the rights of the individual mentioned above, indeed legitimating the moral necessity of legal proceduralism. Only the fusion of legal proceduralism with the idea of the moral community on the one hand and the responsible individual on the other begins to explain the popular fundamentalist passion of a Kenneth Starr or the rigorous moral conservatism of the religious right vis à vis issues such as sexual transgression, abortion and school prayer. The focus on accountability may help to explain why even in the world of corporate ethics American courts tend to hold the individual agents responsible, not the corporation, as Europeans would.¹⁵ Accountability against community and the broad definition of the common good would help to answer the question why

14. Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, 6 January 1995, 65-78. Michael Walzer, "Rescuing Civil Society," *Dissent* (Winter 1999) 62-7. Amitai Etzioni has been trying to export his communitarian reform to Europe without much success. The idea is too American. For a trenchant criticism of these positions Jean Cohen "Does Voluntary Association Make Democracy Work?" in Smelser and Alexander, 263-292.

15. See Löhnert, *passim*, on the remarkable difference between Europe and America in corporate ethics. One reason given for the higher remuneration of American CEOs is this risk of personal accountability. Alas, in America only CEOs, not workers are compensated for the increased risk of job insecurity. Conversely, punitive damages are also individualized and privatized.

among Western democracies only the U.S. holds on to the death penalty (Holmes, 200). Under the aegis of the belief in a *novus ordo saeculorum* which every dollar note reconfirms, community would acquire a religious legitimation, that is, the secular American purpose was soon fired by a sense of religious passion. It sanctified the project of American society and gave to its founding myths a religious underpinning (Gebhardt), thereby stabilizing its immanent logic.

Any number of classic American narratives are devoted to the maintenance or the revitalization of the beloved community when threatened by deviancy, corruption, crime and some evil "other." And these narratives as a rule call upon the moral sense of individuals to right the wrongs. Classic examples include the films "Mr. Deed goes to Town," "Mr. Smith goes to Washington," and "The Grapes of Wrath." The civil religious pattern is stable today and trickles down into most unlikely plots. In a 1993 film, "Sister Act II," Whoopi Goldberg plays a former nun who left the Franciscan order to become a black popular Hollywood entertainer. Mother Superior who also heads a small community college begs her to rejoin the order temporarily to help save the college from going under. Due to low ranking the College is in danger of being closed down by the business manager of the bishop (the central power) who is both mean and male. She accepts and begins teaching music to a non-responsive multi-ethnic student body. This *popular* black nun in a *mendicant* order mobilizes the *student body* to win first prize in a choir competition in Hollywood by doing a ripping *popular version* of a Negro spiritual. Campus dissent is folded into the community effort when the campus Muslim does the lead vocal. Together they fight the power and save the *Community College* from going belly-up.

Zorro and the Lone Ranger are typical community-saving types, stock characters in a long line of national central casting, which may be well extended into the present time to include Erin Brockovich, Rambo, and the Terminator.¹⁶ Indeed the notions of community or union have achieved a sacrosanct status after the Civil War. Lincoln invoked that sense of national community with his domestic metaphor that a "house

16. In Peter Hyams' last film "End of Days" Schwarzenegger saves the world from Satan. He is in search of a virgin with whom to father a future satanic ruler of the world. Schwarzenegger's name is Jericho Crane, J.C. for short, and at the end of the film he sacrifices his life for the virginity of the endangered woman.

divided cannot stand” and in the Gettysburg Address provided the national prayer for that occasion. Clearly the Civil War with its rich array of divisive sub-themes (racism, miscegenation, secession, fratricide) has energized this communitarian source for popular civic desires and anxieties. Again, the utopian dream of community is highly exportable to an increasingly divisive world.

Liberalism of the Market and of the Self. The third layer in the national creed fuses elements drawn from the traditions of the French and Scottish enlightenments into a dual project. Classic American liberalism couples a keen sense of universal civil rights with a *laissez faire* economic order. One pole of the Enlightenment project tends toward ever greater autonomy of the individual and the other pushes the unlimited expansion of a world of goods and their commodification. What Marx called “das Liebeswerben der Waren” (“the erotic tease of commodities”) fills the space between the desirous individual and the market. Theodore Dreiser used this erotic synergy in *Sister Carrie* who would rather lose her virtue than do without the promises of goods. Translated to popular culture, this leads to a focus on individual agents, their individualized desires, and their quest for autonomy on the one hand and to the evolution of a culture industry on the other. America, in the words of Adorno, represents the first radical bourgeois “Tauschgesellschaft” in which the customer is king and in which a new dialectic between average individuals and commodities is allowed to develop without the restraints so typical of European markets.

As a hegemonic ideology classic liberalism acquired its recognizable dialectic between 1820 and 1860, precisely the period when popular culture emerged. In liberalism, rights are lodged in individuals not in groups or estates. Jacksonian democracy injected a rigorous egalitarianism of chances which was then orchestrated by a *laissez faire* liberal economy. The latter lets each individual find his/her own place in the hierarchy of an achievement-oriented social darwinism. “Let the best man win,” this is the motto of the Virginian and it resonates in a general achievement orientation of public rhetoric all over America. Today the term “workfare” speaks to that sentiment. To liberate the individual and, at the same time, to harness established powers, be these religious or governmental – this is the dual thrust of the First Amendment which guarantees the free exercise of religion to every individual, but forbids the establishment of

any corporate religious power or its interference with individual rights.¹⁷ This freedom-from-and-freedom-to-model is crucial for an explanation of, first republican, then liberal “popular” behavior and may be used, by way of analogy, for the balance of any other freedom and fear, i.e. the freedom of ethnic belonging vs. the fear of the establishment of ethnic power. To negotiate and achieve a balance between these two freedoms energizes the majority of American public discourses from States’ rights over affirmative action to abortion.

In literature or film an endless set of stories is devoted to the fate (and the rights) of the lone individual making his/her way within an economic system. Though the market may bear the label free, the folk imagination, echoing Darwin, has compared it more often to a wilderness, even to a jungle. Horatio Alger, Huckleberry Finn, Sister Carrie, Scarlett O’Hara are classical character types coping with adversity in a world defined by a liberal market economy. The freedom of the market is shot through, *pace* P. T. Barnum, W.C. Fields and Groucho Marx, by chance, hucksterism, corruption and humbug. These latter dangers are inevitable side-effects of a free market. Its built-in penchant for corruption helps to account for the aforementioned size of the legal industry which protects the rights of the individual from such chance and adversity. Is it surprising that Social Darwinism which naturalizes an economic separation into winners and losers should have had far greater appeal as a public philosophy in industrializing, liberal America than in imperial, class-bound Britain? Fantasies of personal rights, of total freedom and autonomy, of the imperial self are the theme songs of popular culture, particularly on its substantial libertarian side.¹⁸ They are also the breeding ground of those colossal revenge fantasies so typical of American TV fare when the rights of autonomous individuals are wronged. In short, cultural as well as political authority rests in the individual whom

17. Though the First Amendment binds only the Federal Government, it has had a deep impact on the political culture.

18. William Rees-Mogg, a former Labour Home Secretary, joined Mick Jagger in a talk show: “I was fascinated by the way all his arguments turned on those classic propositions that people ought to be absolutely free and that there ought to be as little government as possible. As he put forward these views which were so much against the grain of the currently fashionable left-wing ideology, I suddenly realised that Mick Jagger was in essence a right-wing libertarian. Straight John Stuart Mill!” quoted in Derek Taylor. It was twenty years ago today. New York: Fireside 1987, 120.

liberalism invests with civil rights and the economic arena to fight it out. This dialectic of freedom and chance is fetching for "gambling" audiences all over the world.

Populism and the Common Man. The fourth strand emerged in the young republic, partially as a reaction to the formation of the new political and social establishment of "gentlemen of property and standing." Populism since then has been the oppositional *ostinato* of American popular (and high) culture to the powers that be, a popular protest against hierarchy and against old, established power. Populism served to bundle some of the previous "creedal passions" (Huntington, 86-7) and gave them a popular, anti-intellectual twist. Characteristic of this Jacksonian movement is a deep distrust of anything exalted, elitist and hierarchical, an oppositional sentiment which has inspired and mobilized both the Left and Right in the course of American history. Indeed populism and a popular anti-intellectualism are so deeply embedded in the American identity that they have become, to modify Richard Hofstadter's words, its transideological base. Both Left and Right proudly proclaim the common man as king and claim to speak for him. This sentiment encouraged the creation of a popular culture industry, and it has given us among other things the Popular Culture Association or Alumni Professors of English who proudly herald the triumph of adcult and materialism in American culture (Twitchell). The consolidation of the Republic gave the emergence of popular culture a latent political advantage which it lacked in other Western cultures. In contrast to Europe, high culture in America was assigned the role of the "adversarial" minority culture which needed special nurture, attention and uplift (Levine). James Fenimore Cooper and Hawthorne were resigned to the fact that American culture was subject to the tyranny of the common man and often succumbed to the market. President John Quincy Adams therefore hastened to express a preference for the American minstrel show as opposed to European opera. Henry James deplored the absence of class-bound cultural traditions and fled to England, where he recorded in countless novels how well-ordered European high culture was imported and financed by the illgotten gains of industrial capital, a cultural uplift and a search for order (Bigsby). It is therefore of particular interest to observe that American popular culture became the adversarial culture of the European left after WWII.

Strategies of Improvement. The emergence of popular culture early

in the 19th century must be seen in conjunction with the reform movement. Reform in turn was buttressed by the popular religious energies let loose by the second Great Awakening. The latter had developed strategies of awakening in order to mobilize new "customers" in the growing religious market created by the new expanding frontier. Such awakenings promoted self-realization through emotional rituals of search for a better life. They permitted emotional and expressive externalization and enhanced audience participation and interaction. Ever since then American rituals of self-improvement and search have tended to be noisy and carnivalesque. During and after the Second Awakening professional specialists in the art of mobilizing reform such as Charles G. Finney began to market their services for the benefit of the public interest (Williams). The energies of such awakenings were focused on the most important person in American culture, the paying customer, a fact which tends to make virtually all culture in America popular including Jenny Lind, the Met or King Tut.¹⁹ Is it surprising then that the paying audience in early American theatre was called "the sovereign." The emerging popular market was stabilized by the socialized tyranny of expectation of the emerging mass audience. This focus on the desires of the customer encouraged the emergence of a consumption ethos in cultural production which occurred earlier and grew faster and stronger than in Europe (Harris, Adorno). The Second Awakening buttressed the belief in the wisdom of the common man by harnessing religious energies to the goals of de-hierarchization and individuation. One example may suffice: Making ministers dependent on church community approval and promoting the belief in the universal apostolate were emancipatory goals which could easily be translated into the political and cultural spheres. This subterranean populist mood with its roots in religious passion has given American popular culture an early moral advantage over high culture, an advantage which was firmly established by the time of the Astor Place riot in May 1849. Populist energies and characters fill the American stage, notably Indian Melodrama and the Minstrel Show. Populism runs like a theme song

19. Museums got started as commercial as well as educational undertakings, but invariably they had to be satisfy the first desire – entertainment – in order to buttress the educational and commercial goals. This is what Charles Willson Peale and P.T. Barnum, America's museum pioneers, taught the nation. For a museum to be successful its mummies must learn to dance.

through American fiction and film from *The Virginian* to "Forrest Gump."²⁰ Again such populism fires the imagination of marginal groups all over the world particularly in conjunction with its strong libertarian offshoots.

Instrumental Reason & Pragmatic Reform. Any design for political action that is triggered by the charters of behavior enumerated above would inevitably generate a strong belief in instrumental reason coupled with pragmatic reform. The hope for improvement has anchored in popular culture a willingness to reform both as a personal and a public agenda.²¹ The focus on individual agency accounts for the fact that the autobiography sections in American bookstores are so extensive and that the personal journal has replaced research papers in some college courses. Not only did America develop over time a wide range of personal help and popular reform literatures, but to mobilize the public into a reformist mind-frame became one of the most important skills of anyone operating in the public arena. Moreover, the belief in reform through instrumental reason has given America a trust in short range social engineering, in quick social therapy and technological innovation which holds firm until today.²² Hence "problem solving" and "quick solutions" are a common theme in popular culture which is full of fixers and soterological figures (like Shane) who welcome the challenge of a problematical situation in order to better things for the common good. Quite early a popular magazine for the dissemination of useful knowledge came on the scene: *Scientific American* (1840sff) a national medium of problem solving. Problem solvers and inventors such as Edison or Ford would in time become popular folk heroes and would in turn found the first industrial museums for the "entertainment and instruction of the

20. The common man was also lampooned for his cussedness and yokelism. Currently a new populist resentment has revived plebiscites as a form of direct government, particularly in California where a series of far-reaching propositions have made governance difficult. The populist temptation explains the partial success of simplifiers such as Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot, a self-proclaimed yokel.

21. Clairborne, the first governor of Louisiana, reported to Washington that while the local French Creoles were only interested in having a good time and dancing Americans were interested in economic and civic improvement.

22. Manfred Henningson writes in *Der Fall Amerika* (München 1974) "Die spontane Machbarkeit von Zivilisation gehört zum genuinen Erfahrungsbestand Amerikas." 152. By comparison Germans tend to be traditionalists and Luddites. Heidegger formulated the deepest caveat against American technical utopianism by calling it "katastrophenhaft" (rife with catastrophe), a sentiment still shared by the fundamentalist Left and Right.

people" (Julius Rosenwald quoted by Skramstad). Ford created the Edison Institute in Dearborn.²³ Advertising, the rhetoric of this commercial ethos, has fallen in line and has made full use of the soteriological and quick-fix yearnings of the American public and therefore practices, as James Twitchell has it, a "rhetoric of salvation." A reform ethos strengthens the belief that "culture" is not so much inherited as made. Hence even tradition is reinvented through the filter of present desire as may be witnessed in Colonial Williamsburg or Disneyland.

Multiculturalism. The simplified moral universe which was developed in populist Jacksonian America was pluralized again by America's ethnic fragmentation. The multiethnic peopling of nineteenth and twentieth century America led to an interesting process: the absorption of the incoming cultural, ethnic, racial inputs into one unified "immigrant American" frame, an *Aufhebung* of the ethnic other in an emerging, loose American mainstream defined and shaped by a popular cultural industry. This absorption was accompanied by strong nativist reactions and therefore involved conscious processes of passing, of travesty, and parody and unconscious processes of creolization enhanced by a structural amnesia. Ethnic groups simply forgot those normative particulars of their traditional culture that did not "work" in America. Indeed, it was in the long-range interest to forget in order not to call out the nativist dogs. Structural amnesia served to slough off counterproductive ethnic traditions. Germans gave up their dual bread or "warm beer" culture, Italians forgot about "al dente", for neither group could sell it to the others. Consciously or unconsciously a levelling of ethnically specific cultures occurred towards a marketable common denominator that would appeal beyond normative ethnic horizons to a trans- or panethnic audience. The resulting common denominator of tolerable ethnic otherness was further-

23. Some critics of American museum culture have viewed the professionalisation and inward turn of museums in the 20th century as a deviation from their original purpose (Skramstad). The boom of museums after 1960 indicates a return to the older entertainment-cum-educational model, now under the aegis of "educational experience." Miraculous solutions to social problems continue to be popular. The wonderdrug Prozac, Whitebook says, was welcomed because it made psychoanalysis (and Freud) superfluous. Cf. Joel Whitebook, "Psychoanalysis and Democracy," *Dissent* (Spring 1999), 59-66. And Viagra's success speaks for itself. Such outgrowths of popular fantasy as Science Fiction and Scientology couple rational mastery with a libertarian market economy. These projects are energized by a belief in instrumental reason, in ego-centered networks and a promise to fix things. T. Jackson Lears and James Twitchell consider commodities a modern form of magic (Lears, 40-75).

more folklorized (in the abovementioned populist and market-oriented manner), so that today we have before us a congerie of no fault, trickle down ethnic cultures of celebration domesticated through the filter of commodification. Oktoberfests in Cincinnati or Lukenbach, Texas may serve as an example. This folkloric absorption enhances the Arminian turn in multiculturalism and its ruling credo of celebration: I'm ok, you're ok.

The specific turns that urbanization or industrialization took in America would be unthinkable without the influx of immigrant groups from 1825 to the present. Hence the experience of "cultural" ethnicity is peculiarly American, particularly when coupled with the essentializing energy of populism within a civil rights universal frame. Though inter-ethnic conflict and a coupling of ethnicity with class was constitutive of America's peculiar, ethnically staggered class system (eth-class), there was also the long-range hope of moving on up and closing ranks with a generalized, universal American culture. At the same time this common or mainstream culture had become, over the years, heavily ethnicized. When Selznick was asked what music he planned to use for the all-American epic "Gone With the Wind" his answer was: "good old Jewish music." By 1938 it had become the American popular standard.²⁴

Consequently, the daily experience of an ongoing "antagonistic acculturation" (George Devereux) grew itself into a popular cultural mainstream. The cultural give-and-take across ethnic and racial boundaries, involving intermarriage and cultural mixing, became standard fare for sketches or jokes on the popular stage. Indeed it may be the motor behind the popularity of American stand-up comedy which is today being copied everywhere in the world (ousting indigenous traditions such as *Kabarett* in Germany). The adventure of ethnic jockeying for a better place under the universal sun may not be peculiar to America, yet the size of its immigrant population at a crucial stage during the period of industrialization and urbanization and the promise of its liberal naturalization law within a racialized public sphere kept the theme of assimilation and of nativism constantly on the public agenda. Therefore the double consciousness both of ethnic marginality (wounds) and of ethnic empowerment (entitle-

24. Among the major songwriters there was only one lonely WASP, Cole Porter, and he professed a love for African American and Jewish music.

ments) is endemic to the American immigrant experience within a liberal setup. Another such tradition of the popular stage has explored the code switching between alternative identities. America offered its ethnic members the option of becoming "a real Yankee," as Abraham Cahan's Yekl has it, or to remain an orthodox Jew with many partial and, often comic, compromises in-between. Role and code switching between Anglo or ethnic identities gave rise to rich ethnic comedy, to interethnic and interracial joking and to the sort of hazing that is part and parcel of any initiation ritual. The ethnic and race boundary with its infinite modes of fragmentation or fusion, of passing or of transgression forms a nodal point for American popular culture formation. More recently gender crossing has followed patterns similar to those of ethnic boundary management, and it is equally rife with rich themes. Moreover, exploring the boundaries between real and virtual spaces and identities is another spin-off from this experience. It is therefore no accident that ethnic subgroups the world over adopt these strategies and their rhetoric.

Race: the Blackening of American Culture. For a long time the African-American impact on American popular culture, particularly on its music, remained a well kept, repressed secret. Ralph Ellison alerted us to the invisibility of black culture after the Second World War in his novel *Invisible Man* and in 1970 asked tongue in cheek, "what American culture would be like without blacks" (O'Meally, xi). Since then its formative influence has been acknowledged (Lipsitz). Much earlier the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung tried to alert his American readers in 1930 to "your Negroid behavior," an observation that fell on deaf ears at the time (Jung). Yet, he was the first to notice that African-American rules of performance had seeped into the American popular mainstream and into American body language or kinetics. Today, few people would deny that contemporary American popular music or dance derives largely from Black cultural models (White & White, Price, passim). This has to do with the sheer energy of its forms which needs to be explained.

Black culture acquired its energy from an existential need: to combat the social death of slavery. The existential difference to the slave master could not be marked using the instruments of politics or economics that were available to other whites; only in the largely unattended and unpolitical area of culture could blacks carve out spaces of freedom. By creating "their own" memory culture, albeit of an "Afrique de l'esprit"

within the New World, Blacks could hold on to a sense of self. In that crucial sense, the existence of slavery energized Black cultural production in order to mark that difference. This fact has given to New World diasporic creoles an existential urgency that other ethnic subcultures have lacked. Hence, to European observers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries black performers seemed to perform as if their life depended on it. It did. This helps to identify and understand how Black cultural practice and performance could become, even in the guise of racist parody, a hidden dynamo of American popular culture (Ostendorf, 1979). Moreover, there are next to this subliminal and existential energy moral underpinnings which makes it attractive to all marginalized selves or groups the world over. Blacks by their very presence, as Ellison argued, were after all the guardians of constitutional liberties.

Professional Afrocentrists claim that African-American forms are continuities or "survivals" of Africa. This makes little sense. Instead, they are constant recreations of African memories to create social spaces of freedom in the New World in the crucible of slavery (Price & Price). This has given to African-American forms the power and quality of New World myth-making and to "American" civil rights issues an urgency amplified by the gradual recognition of the wrongs of slavery. The claim of black "authenticity or of African origins" is also misguided for the simple reason that essentialism would fail to account for the blackening of American mainstream culture.²⁵ An essentialist take makes even less sense for the fractal, circumatlantic diasporic Africanist syncretisms in Caribbean plantation slavery. Indeed, from its inception African-American culture formation has occurred in a constant negotiation with all other ethnic groups including Native Americans.²⁶ The Africanization of European styles occurs not as a maintenance or as a survival of "African substances or meanings," but in the mimicry and signifying of a more general African attitude towards things – particularly in motor behavior and energy management, that is, in performance (Price & Price).

The Africanization of European materials through performance places

25. Except of course as a rip-off theory which is very popular among blacks.

26. Consider the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans or the curious mix that has gone into the making of Clifton Chenier's version of the Acadian folksong "Jolie Blonde," let alone what he did to "Bon Ton Roule" on the accordeon.

emphasis on communal, participatory music-making, on style, sound quality and the mechanics of delivery. Text or score that constitute the major crutches of European performances are decidedly secondary. Trombonist Trummy Young used to taunt his copycats "Taint What You Do (It's the Way That You Do It)." This performative tradition enhances a new interconnectedness: there is in African American popular performance an intimate synergy of music and musician, dancer and dance, rhythm and bodies – within the frame of a bodily, loose, kinetic, energetic, non-repressive performance. What we witness to this day in the ring-shout, in Mardi Gras Indian practice, in the jazz funeral, or during the service of a "rocking church" is a unified experience of communal, transformative energy. This religious energy over time seeped into American popular culture surreptitiously. Aretha Franklin, James Cleveland, and Ray Charles quite openly translated it into the popular musical canon.

Performance styles of African-American culture have a transformative trajectory, i.e. they are trying to achieve a new level of social or existential being, either through spirit-possession or community creation. In early slave cultures, this meant bringing out "African memories" in the dynamics of the ritual. This pattern has settled comfortably in the American "born-again" dynamic of religious rituals. But each Africanizing liberation, if it results in a new form, could be and often was picked up by white copyists, most notably in Ragtime and Jazz. Charles Keil writes that with each appropriation of a Black musical tradition into a European structure of feeling, the new African-American musical self-assertion had to become ever more imaginatively African. Hence new African-American styles were constantly added to the mainstream. This constant reinvention of a mythical Africa has made African-American culture ever more American in that it followed the quintessentially American trajectory of a quest for literacy, autonomy, and freedom, a constant innovative pressure "to make it new." This makes Jazz in my view the one American high modernist contribution to world culture.²⁷

Both the rhythmic and harmonic sense of African American music is markedly different with its dominance of percussion, its polymeters, its

27. This is a position held by Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray. Cf. the forthcoming book by Robert Crunden on Jazz and Modernism or O'Meally *passim*.

off-beat phrasing, its overlapping call and response, its propulsive swing, its deflationary down-beat, and its blue notes. None of these are “well-tempered” and meet European expectations. But every single one of these individual elements has at one time or another slipped into the mainstream of popular musical performance, often under the guise of put-down, comedy or parody. At the time of their crossing of the color line they were as a rule identified by WASPish cultural custodians as impure, degenerate and hence dangerous. Elvis Presley’s pelvic thrust which was censored out of the Ed Sullivan show may serve as one such threshold crisis (Ostendorf, 1998) .

Another characteristic of Black performance is the shift between and conflation of sacred and profane worlds which adds an interesting chapter to the Western secularization vs sacralization scenario. The general tendency has been towards a merging of ritual styles of performance. The use of vernacular styles in church and Black religious styles in concert has accelerated. There has been a simultaneous “vernacularization” of religious ritual and a “sacralization” of secular performance styles, say, when a Black church hymn “We Shall Overcome” becomes the national anthem of the Civil Rights movement or when James Brown goes into a preacherly frenzy. At this point, “signifying” – the trope of tropes in African-American culture – chimes in. In Black culture actors signify on actors, themes signify on themes, genres signify on other genres, the secular realm signifies on the sacred. There is a constant kinetic and sonic mimesis, most notably in cutting contests that are endemic to all communal performances, be they jam sessions or buck jumping contests at Jazz funerals. Also, the call-and-response pattern may be called a trope of tropes which feeds into a dialogical, conversational character of black music making. The trope of revision entails the quoting of previous styles. Hence intertextuality, self-referentiality, imitation, parody, and travesty in African-American oral tradition add up to what would in Western culture be identified as postmodern (Ostendorf, 1979). These characteristics, though not unknown in Western music, were in their concentration and early occurrence unique to black popular music.

Last, but not least, African American music-making aims for high density of performance events within a relatively short musical space. There tends to be a profusion of simultaneous musical activities, as if an

attempt is being made to fill up every available niche of musical space. This may well correspond to the sound ideal of certain West African traditions that favor collective improvisation of equal instruments (Wilson). To this day second line bands in New Orleans avoid division of labor between instruments, all are melodic, all are rhythmic, and all are loud – and they manage to fill a neighborhood with sound.

These rules of performance have over time been partially absorbed by American popular culture and honed by and adapted to a multiethnic audience. Second generation American Jews and Italians have been instrumental in translating this black energy into mainstream culture. This ethnic collusion has made these items irresistible to oppressed groups or to individuals around the world trying to break out of their shackles. Not only Ghanaian asylum seekers in Munich, but Tungusian youth in Siberia, Senegalese hip hop groups and German-Turkish adolescents in Berlin mimic the playful African-American ritual gestures of existential transgression and mock defiance and create their versions rap, hip-hop and break dance. When, after 1960 popular music became part of a new teenage life style, these black musical rules of performance and rituals of defiance stood ready to serve that purpose.²⁸

III. Checks and Balances: the Choreography of Harmony

Using the constitutional system of checks and balances as a template, I propose that these propulsive energies and creedal passions as they developed and adjusted in the crucible of an exceptional history are in a constant battle of negotiations effecting what Kenneth Burke referred to as the “unending conversation” of American culture. The constitutional system of checks and balances finds its parallel in the dialogic network of

28. The Senegalese hip hop group Positive Black Soul has no truck with African ethnic empowerment. Hence they would rather not have their records marketed under the African or Senegalese label, but would rather be listed in the American hip hop section. “We are not exotic or cloned African monkeys” they protest, “but a regular hip hop band.” Regular means American. On black Afrocentric rap PBS comments: “Instead of rapping constantly about Mother Africa, they should come and see for themselves. When they do and find out they cannot make money they lose interest fast.” Ray Rutledge, “Wir sind keine geklonten Affen.” Süddeutsche Zeitung Nr. 180 August 7-8, 1999, VII.

foundational discourses, each one with its set of journals, cohorts and preachers. Their cacophonous chorus constitutes the public sphere which, however divisive individual clashes may be, tends towards a harmonization of the system. The hidden logic of checks and balances according to Federalist 10 works towards a check on "excesses" and a new and improved "balance" of conflicting public desires.²⁹ Indeed, much of the public cultural energy in America is devoted to crisis management to mitigate what Samuel Huntington identified as its Promise of Disharmony, a gap between high goals and low practice, between sterling ideals and rotten institutions. American popular culture comes to life in the thick anarchy of this energizing disharmony which gives rise to a permanent sense of crisis and a permanent need for public argument. Therefore popular cultural discourses often veer off into jeremiadic talking cures. The jeremiadic narrative tradition forms an integral part of popular culture production and hence should not be misunderstood by Europeans, as it often is by French and German pundits, as a symptom of real world historical self-doubt, of real social decline or, alas, of cultural degeneracy (Ceaser).

The English critic, Rupert Wilkinson, has identified four such basic fears that have mobilized the American political and social imagination. And these fears explain the existence of so many issue-oriented publications with fitting names such as *Dissent*, *The Nation*, *Commentary*, *The New Republic*, *The Public Interest*, *Journal of Democracy* (Wilkinson). Though none of these journals could be called popular, they occupy a middle ground in the public sphere between high and low, a middling public sphere lacking in Europe. They represent in Henry James' words "the antennae of the race," better yet they are the tip of an iceberg of anxieties. The first fear is that of falling apart which has given us books such as *The Disuniting of America*, by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Secondly, the

29. The current network of discursive settings that are in conflict over the definition of a civil society may be summarized as follows: a calvinist-fundamentalist discourse (Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, religious right et. al.); a conservative-libertarian discourse (right-wing Republicans and libertarians); a philosophy of liberal conservatism (mainstream) including a neo-liberal "third way" (Clinton-Blair); a left-liberal-communitarian discourse (Walzer, Rorty, Taylor, *Dissent*); a set of postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist, gay and postcolonial discourses (politics of difference, minority discourses etc.). Each one of these factions could be broken down further. All have their own sets of journals and publishing outlets which vie for public attention and compete in the high political art of agenda setting.

fear of falling away has produced *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch or *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah. Then the fear of winding down has cranked out *The Closing of the American Mind* by Alan Bloom and *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* by Paul Kennedy. Finally, popular fantasy constantly generates the fear of being owned by the Europeans, Japanese, or unidentifiable “aliens.” It should be noted that such “anxiety-books” inevitably end up on the popular bestseller list and in talk shows even when their quality is at best mediocre. These fears also inspire the plot production of popular movies as well as of popular fiction, and they mirror the anxieties of modern American life. To articulate these anxieties and to harmonize the promise of disharmony is the object of culture production from the age of reform and immigration to the age of globalization.

IV. The Politics and Economics of American Popular Culture

Two things are clear: In the US the “soul and myth” of popular culture, to use Aristotle’s terms, are intimately bound up with the public order. And the American model of legitimating culture differs markedly from Europe (cf. Bourdieu, 109). Though the Americanization of Europe may soon obliterate distinctions, the ruling model of legitimation in Europe feeds on a stubborn persistence of hierarchical habits of the heart. Carriers of cultural production and sources of its energy were in the nineteenth century the feudal tradition, estates, crafts, social and economic classes, the intelligentsia, folk & regional traditions, and the state. Status and class are still articulated in Europe through taste and cultural preferences. The classic function of the *Feuilleton* is to rise above the crass and crude and to aim for the very best, hence most cultural criticism in the daily press tends towards an avantgarde or elite model of cultural production.³⁰

The American model of legitimation is in contrast basically egali-

30. Diedrich Diederichsen claims that the longest article on popular culture the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung ever published was to criticize it as evil. “Die Boxen des Bösen. Warum die Zeichen der Popkultur immer wieder falsch gelesen werden,” Süddeutsche Zeitung Nr. 108 (12./13. Mai 1999) 19. FAZ’s allegiance

tarian, if not populist. Equality before the law and equality of chances favor a common rather than elite denominator, and the common man ideology of populism denies any cultural privilege to the elite. Clearly, the European concept of an elite culture, as Lawrence Levine has shown, was grafted upon industrializing America as a new search for order and quality. Since then, the elite concept has served as a permanent bad conscience, but has not really stopped or influenced the evolution of a popular culture industry. Its prime goal, the pursuit of happiness translates into the empowerment of individualistic choice as a "popular chance." "This is a free country" is a classic American rhetorical flourish, popular among children vis-a-vis their parents. This world of chance, however, is not truly free, but is controlled by a Social Darwinist market, a racialized society and a liberal achievement filter, all with their own sets of socially grown advantages. Its chief attraction may simply lie in the fact that the modernizing trajectory of the American social utopia is ahead of all the other cultures. That trajectory tends towards an ever-increasing individualization of life styles and of custom-made options in an ever diversifying world of goods, leading to what one target group specialist called the clustering of America.

The American System of (Cultural) Production. The central strands of the American creed and the frames of legitimation set the stage for the "American system of manufacture" (Hounshell), a logic of production which, in the creation of popular culture, is in place as early as 1830. The American system of production, as David Hounshell and Umberto Eco remind us, operates on the principles of seriality and replaceable parts, principles enhanced by the tendency of an emerging liberal capitalism toward a simultaneous centralization and differentiation. This system was first developed in the federal armories and adopted much later in industrial production. In the production of popular culture it was in place as early as 1830. It began in the Minstrel Show, then it was used in the Burlesque shows, in Indian Melodrama, in the Vaudeville theatres of Keith and Albee, later in Soap Opera and in the studio system of the film

to high culture may explain why European patrons, music critics and recording companies dutifully step in to keep the American classical and jazz avantgardes going while holding the sort of jazz entertainers that energize the American night club scene in mild contempt.

industry. The tripartite Minstrel Show set the stage for what one might want to call in analogy to flexible production “flexible representation and performance.” It was made up of individual components which could easily be exchanged, replaced or locally updated and, where necessary, adjusted to the sensitivities of regional and ethnic audiences. Minstrel shows were produced in series using replaceable parts, often employing parallel traveling teams operating under one “brand” name. Handbooks on how to produce your own, custom-made minstrel show became very popular late in the century. This system of serial production was elaborated and perfected in the 19th century and entered the cultural industry of the 20th century, particularly in film.³¹ Hence, one might argue with the English sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry that popular culture was postfordist *avant la lettre*: “We are arguing, *pace* many Marxists, against any notion that culture production is becoming more like commodity production in manufacturing industry. Our claim is that ordinary manufacturing industry is becoming more and more like the production of culture.” In short, the early culture industries invented the model or template that much later was adopted by commodity manufacture (Lash/Urry, 123). Such a reflexive logic of cultural production encouraged the professionalization of individual segments and allowed for an infinite differentiation of the formula. The Ziegfeld Follies may serve as an example. They were made up of individual acts, every one of them independent and highly professional. In such a system a W.C. Fields or Bert Williams could, and needed to, fine-tune and perfect their performance styles and techniques of delivery in order to keep their competitive edge. This system also honed the popular cultural genres themselves which in turn professionalized the replaceability and seriality of production. Hence the “American system of culture production” has a built-in reflexive logic of productivity enhancement, an internal trajectory which gravitates towards ever greater efficiency. While the overall production may thus be ever more centralized, the formulaic nature of its segments permits a market differentiation to accommodate the desires of wide array

31. Much later Paul Whiteman at the peak of his popularity ran 3-4 orchestras at different places in the US under the Paul Whiteman logo. He would shuttle from one place to the other and make brief appearances as conductor. This way his orchestra could be ubiquitous without any one of them having to travel.

of customers including the incoming ethnic group who, as Viviana Zelizer and Lizabeth Cohen demonstrate, have always put the nationally homogenized offerings of the culture industry to very particular ethnic uses (Zelizer, Cohen). The same holds true for Turkish-German rap groups in Berlin. Neither group of "discriminating users," however, can escape the logic or hegemonic monopoly of the culture industry, particularly not in this age of digitalization.

V. Scenarios, scripts and key themes of American popular culture

After defining the pragmatic charters of behavior, the foundational discourses of American culture, and the American system of popular culture production, let us look at the family resemblances in the scenarios, scripts, and themes which the popular culture industry has produced with great consistency. What follows is a cluster of motifs, tropes, and themes which intertwine and also overlap with the previous observations. It is hard to draw clear analytical distinctions and mark categorical separations, say between an (adolescent) structure of feeling and popular cultural signifiers, because the historical aggregate of the American experience bundles cultural energies and cultural productions in a constantly shifting, creolizing fashion.³² Hence the following observations neither add up to a theory, nor even a classification, nor do they claim to be exhaustive.

Scale characterizes the American mode of production and inspires its fantasy. Most Europeans are as struck by the horizontal expanse of American nature, as by the vertical thrust of its urban architecture. Both trajectories inspire fantasies of scale. The "discovery" of America set in motion a Westernizing myth, put on track by Bishop Berkeley, which subsequently jelled in the go-West fantasy and in the trope that the world historical progress moved from Asia to Greece to Rome, and conse-

32. Just like in the rest of the world? In Europe, as Fernand Braudel has demonstrated, the normative frame of cultures remained stable over a longer period. The Americas, this is my argument, were in the vanguard of modernization much earlier.

quently from Europe to America. The American variant of this mythical motion is the metaphor of the moving frontier with its Manichean space, a shifting, westerning boundary which opens choice and invites transgression, both morally and spatially. A manifest destiny drives the American imagination including its moving frontier towards ever greater expanse and to new multitudes, that the prototypical American individual, Walt Whitman, claimed to personally "contain". The scale of the landscape finds its analogue in production. Large-scale output, made possible by the American system of production, dwarfs competitors and inundates markets. The American "culture industry" has had an early start. The advantage of its size and its internal professionalization made it irresistible as the phenomenal early successes in Europe of the minstrel shows, the Buffalo Bill's Original Wild West shows and the Barnum Bailey's Circus or the sheer size of the Hollywood production machine demonstrate.³³

The frontier is a function of spatial organization. It represents the fault line in what the French call a *paysage moralisé*. And the moralized landscape is the best setting for a melodramatic narrative and action formula. Melodramatic narrative formulae are energized by a Manichean world view, which depends on a clear moral division between good and evil. Frontiers and boundaries mark the divide between civilization and wilderness, but also present moral choices, between sin and grace, between good and evil. Last but not least, they separate winners from losers.³⁴ Suzanne Braun Levine characterizes the Manichean form of narrative as a "combat mode" which favors clear outcome over process, actions over ideas (Rosenblatt, 108). American culture dramatizes these extremes which leads to "mood simplification" of complex problems in terms of focus, and to "mood intensification" in terms of moral passion. The American public is easily whipped up into "creedal passions," when the choices are binary, whether these be about alcohol, smoking, Saddam Hussein or sexual transgression. There is clear good and clear evil or, if

33. Size, from buildings to bridges to breasts, has always stimulated popular fantasy everywhere. European visitors are struck that American tour guides love to dwell on the size, weight or cost of landmarks.

34. Richard Posner argues that the fixation on winners and losers is noticeable in the American system of justice "How American justice has failed" Times Literary Supplement (26.2. 1999).

this division is not apparent, prosecutors such as Kenneth Starr proceed on the assumption that these ought to be the only available moral choices. This radicalized moral dramaturgy facilitates and favors revenge fantasies such as we witness almost daily on TV. "The essential action of melodrama," writes Jeffrey Mason, "is to polarize its constituents, whatever they may be – male and female, East and West, civilization and wilderness, and, most typically good and evil ... the melodramatic world is composed of binary oppositions." (Mason 16-17).

The porousness, studied informality and fluidity of American English served all the above-mentioned purposes best. Moreover, American English was constantly enriched by multicultural inputs. Today, "American" is the *lingua franca* of the modern business world, as much as "African American" is the *lingua franca* of music. George Steiner echoes Frank Zappa: "In short, the vocabularies, the contextual behaviour-patterns of pop and rock, constitute a genuine *lingua franca*, a 'universal dialect' of youth. Everywhere a sound-culture seems to be driving back the old authority of verbal order"(Traber, 1). Because of the populism of the common man tradition, American dialects and sociolects do not have clearly identifiable class markers. In the processes of interethnic hazing, there occurred a honing of a global improvisational and vernacular style which outperforms any other global language.

Therefore the popular stories of the world are told in "American." Ever so subtly, American rhetoric transports an American perspective in its narratives of popular culture. "Hollywood epitomizes the enduring capacity of the American empire without frontiers to discover, process, and redistribute techniques, styles and tastes of global provenance" (de Grazia). The conventions of Hollywood storytelling have become a mode of providing popular historical interpretations.³⁵ Narrative style, characterization, dialogue, and plots reshape our memories of the past and reposition us for the future, which therefore becomes ever more Amer-

35. For ordinary citizens historical knowledge of the Kennedy assassination is shaped more by Oliver Stone's film JFK than by historical sources. American historical knowledge of Germany is inevitably shaped by Hogan's Heroes and holocaust films. Germans take their revenge by dubbing and thus Germanizing American films. Humphrey Bogart's invitation addressed to Ingrid Bergman in Casablanca to get soused "Here is looking at you, kid" is lost in translation as "Schau mir in die Augen, Kleine."

ican (Lipsitz). Carl Schmitt in 1932 expressed the apocalyptic fear that whoever controls the language and defines concepts or agendas controls the future. America, says Alexandre Kojève resignedly with Jean Baudrillard in tow, is the future.

In 1986, I characterized the storytelling of AFN TV in a way that fits much popular cultural storytelling: "The emplotment of the storyline, both for the benefit of the viewer's time and the sponsor's budget, operates on a relatively short libidinal attention span. What gave coherence to more traditional forms of storytelling, the plot (the three unities of time, place and action), is chopped up into short sequential bursts, each with their own simulacrum of a micropolot... The goal is to create an unending series of reversals, moments of ecstasy and anticipation, which then may be usurped by the commercial..." This serialization of microplots favors roles and characters with direct audience appeal. Hence there is at least one character in each sit-com with whom any section of the audience may identify. Therefore, a noticeable typecasting prevailed in nineteenth-century popular fiction as well as in *Bonanza*, the *Bill Cosby Show* or *General Hospital* which in turn favors the professionalization of recognizable types and the enculturation of such habits of expectation. Instant dramatic effects that will entertain are more important than dramaturgical considerations of sentiment or character development. The chain of motivation is often interrupted by the logic of sensation. The overall consequence leads to a dramatization of effect and the foregrounding of coded, recognizable character types (Ostendorf, 1986). This is the narrative context for advertising, i.e. goods as soterological heroes.

The American ideology of the independent self and the dissent tradition have established the practice of routinized transgression as a natural right of the protestant individual and of the imperial, "this-is-a-free-country" self. And yet, such transgressive acts must never challenge the parameters of the American ideology, that is, all transgressions are contained within its basic conservative frame. The question how far can the imperial self go without becoming "un-American" and what constitutes acceptable American behavior is food for endless stories and debates. This model of individual liberation is seductive the world over since it implies the right for transformation and for an individual escape from the crab basket of whatever normative culture is holding him/her back from

fulfillment.³⁶ The individuation of life styles is now in its globalizing phase. One explanation for the success of American popular culture therefore may be simply that US popular culture was and is in the vanguard of this development.

To be born American is to be born again, again and again, argues Myra Jehlen. Hence the rhetoric of American culture is marked by a high degree of representation of personal transformation, from Hawthorne's Holgrave to Bob Dylan. Americanization is not a single occurrence, even less is being American a status, but a constant working over and at best an improvement over a previous condition. For a while the frontier became the most popular icon as the locus of transformation, as argued by Frederick Jackson Turner. Here the agent of transformation is the wilderness itself which produces the individual that "masters" that same wilderness in terms of "self-improvement." But also the "wounds" of history (racism, sexism, imperialism, urbanism) are now used as new frontiers or as arenas for such improvement or, in newspeak, empowerment. The hope of transformation is of course eminently exportable and is just the thing to cheer up morose youth in other parts of the world.

The fuel for these transformative drives is the cultivation of deep longings of individuals such as freedom, liberation, youth, mobility, renewal, expressiveness, extrication from all social contexts (romance vs. novel), or modernization as *antipassatismo*. Popular artists often create a supreme ego, a person liberated from all social constraints – in fiction this genealogy reaches from Huck Finn over *Henderson the Rain King* to *Tank Girl*. In this context, powerful myths of everyday life emerge, common and simple virtues: patriotism, temperance, simplicity, virginity, domesticity, purity, honesty, sisterhood and friendship which are being broadcast in ever changing variations of the same. These are simple virtues which are best presented in simple forms of American television, romance, melodrama, or science fiction. Again, all these virtues will also be questioned and lampooned in counterveiling or dialogic narratives of disharmonic comedy and parody, from Mark Twain to *Saturday Night Live* and *American Beauty*.

36. The image focuses on the normative resistance of local cultures to dissent: When a crab wants to crawl out of the basket the others pull him back.

Popular culture is action-oriented: pragmatic action rather than metaphysics, application rather than theory motivates the protagonist. Hence the instrumentalization of violence for a moral purpose is a stock in trade. Indeed the Republic itself began with a right to violence. The legacy of the right to bear arms is allegedly secured in the Second Amendment which survived the violent challenge of civil war and secession. The fascination with violence stands in a direct correlation with the inviolability of the individual. "Violation" of the inviolable individual is therefore the most common theme and violence is the fuel for the defense of individualism, as the impassioned defence of the right to bear arms indicates. Hence American popular culture is chock full of violence followed by revenge, resentment and rage – and guns. Death and destruction in rampant popular culture, yet at the same time the denial of death in social mores and official public culture is proverbial.

In a world of such violence and routinized transgression the leveling function of American humorous tradition has a therapeutic mission: humor converts downward and defuses both hierarchy and violence. Humor constitutes the most pervasive ritual of "antagonistic acculturation." Irishmen and Jews impersonating Blacks, Jews laughing about and with Italians, the Alsatian Jew Chico Marx impersonating an Italian fruit vendor, Lenny Bruce signifying on the Pope etc. The absence of a clear public sense of social class makes intraethnic humor all the more important as a means of marking identity and cultural boundaries. In England, by contrast, humor is generated on the social fault line of class difference.

Throughout American history there has been a dual pull: a nostalgic return to origins that has given rise to periodic moods of revival. As a rule this return to an older and simpler life involves the invention of a pastoral past, quite concretely in Colonial Williamsburg or in Disney's Mainstreet USA and Celebration City or in the eclectic historicizing architecture so popular in America from 1880 to 1930. This invention of tradition is inspired by nostalgia without memory.³⁷ Yet, this nostalgic return to ori-

37. The same sentiment inspires certain communitarian projects that bemoan the decline of family and voluntarism, yet their ideal of a civil society bears little relationship to historic fact. Cohen in Smelser & Alexander, 1999.

gins is at the same time coupled with a need for radical new beginnings. There is the youthful impulse in each generational cohort to begin the city on a hill all over again. The adage that Americans love progress, yet dread change couples these conflicting motives. We find them in the imaginaries of popular culture as well as in the rhetoric of advertizing. Campbell's mass-produced soups were promoted in the late twenties as "home-made" or even as "unique works of art, endorsed by Sir Joshua Reynolds." This nostalgic lie served to counter the excessive modernizations of the age of which, ironically, advertising was a chief agent. Indeed, products of mass production were often advertised as therapies for or antidotes to the consequences of mass society. Later, Warhol re-recognized the Campbell or Heinz can as pop art, lifting it from mass commodification to the level of high art, at least as far as their exchange value was concerned. Quite in line with his intention, he called his studio the "factory" where silkscreen prints with replaceable parts could be produced in series. Memory-as-nostalgia has through advertizing become a commodified, added value to cultural products.

In a review of the phenomenally successful Harry Potter books Alison Lurie speculates on the question why there are so many children's books in Britain or America. Her conclusion is that in the Anglosaxon world since the 18th century childhood is considered the superior condition. It has since then enjoyed a romantic glorification which conceives of youth as adversarial to and subversive of the adult world. The culture industry certainly confirms her observation. After 1920 the general drift of mass cultural design and its color scheme in particular has been toward a juvenile taste as witnessed in the golden arches, the gaudy displays of the strip or the Christmas decoration anywhere. Much of the appeal of advertising is directed toward that juvenile residue in every buyer. Advertising executive Helen Woodward quipped: in the factory we produce soap, but in the store we sell youth.

Culture of Excess and Society of the Spectacle: Popular culture, particularly in the forms advanced by advertising, marked a shift from limited need to unlimited desire. James Twitchell puns on the defunct older morality of a culture of production when he calls the motto of the new culture of consumption "Lead us into temptation." The world of commodification encourages the development of the "tease" as a rich promise of more and better things to come. Open-ended desire is cultivated and

encouraged by the trajectory of advertising which generates, when left to its own devices, a culture of excess and therefore of also of numbing (Bodker) which again creates its own countervailing and deflationary measures, say, in "hip consumerism" (Frank) and its appropriate self-reflexive ads. Excess is the stuff of the tall tale and of regional brag-gadocio. Excess is the guiding principle also of Gotham, i.e. Manhattan, of Las Vegas, of The Strip and The Mall. Excess is the catechism of a consumer society with an upwardly mobile aspiration gap. At the same time American popular culture is marked by the dominance of the carnivalesque and the spectacle (Debord). From conventions of the Republican Party to College football games, naturalization rituals, ethnic parades, rock concerts, Oscar nominations or 4th of July celebrations the *mise en scène* is inspired by carnivalesque strategies of performance which reach back in history to religious "revivalism" buttressed by black performance styles.

Globalizing America, Gobalizing Utopia?

Following Alexandre Kojève's lead Jean Baudrillard in his *L'Amérique* defines America as "utopia achieved." According to Fukuyama there is a "sole liberal project," and it is American. Much earlier the Wilsonian branch of American foreign policy pursued an "American liberal grand strategy" (Iriye). Will all the world then become America? The utopian imagination in Europe and the rest of the world has associated physical and material well being with America. It is an Eldorado and the land of riches. The fantasy's global attraction rests on a simple fact: the Americans were the first to make bourgeois comfort affordable for ordinary people (Taylor, 272). Americans have contributed to the mythologizing of their own advantage. Tocqueville noticed that Americans treated goods in a redemptive fashion, as a means of undoing the curse of labor, and he quipped that it was hard to tell whether American preachers prayed for deliverance in the next world or for material well-being in this world. Material prosperity and commodification thus acquired the aura of redemption from want and from class ascription. The latter remained

coded as "European."³⁸ In the rhetoric of American civil religion, secular and sacred metaphors often get mixed up. This helps to explain the elective affinity between religion and commodification so puzzling to most Europeans. Bruce Barton's popular bestseller *The Man Nobody Knows. A Discovery of the Real Jesus* (1927) heralded Jesus as the best advertising and PR executive of all time who gathered an efficient team around him and marketed his product world-wide. Indeed, the pursuit of happiness, which began as a political notion, was then buttressed by religion and lately enhanced by sexual promise, is nowhere quite as brazenly propagated as in the world of goods. Liberation, autonomy, emancipation, satisfaction, bliss, instant gratification: these are the promises attached to the "new and improved" goods of the market. In the American advertising practice, this dogma of unlimited and immaculate consumption has since 1970 been shot through with postmodern irony (Ostendorf, 1997). The promise of sexual fulfilment is translated by advertising into ever more sophisticated sexual tease. Rob Kroes located an ad for Levi 508 pants in Amsterdam advertising not only Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, among them freedom of choice, but also "freedom of movement" which in this case guaranteed enough room for a full erection (Kroes).³⁹

Critical readers may want to challenge the mounting swell of exceptionalism that characterizes this archeology of American popular culture as viewed from the outside. Admittedly, many of the trends when seen in isolation have myriad European prefigurations or antecedents. What then is "exceptional" about them? First, their early timing and uninhibited growth within the most modern political and economic project: the American Republic as a market economy. Secondly, their concentration and historic coincidence in the period of early modernization. To many

38. The meshing of gender, progressivism and consumption is currently being analyzed in greater depth by American historians. American advertising agencies first discovered "woman" as the "general purchasing agent" (GPS), thus gendering consumption and its liberatory promises. This gave a boost to popular, progressive and emancipatory women's magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, or *McCalls*. James Twitchell gives three cheers to soteriological materialism in *Lead Us Into Temptation. The Triumph of American Materialism*. New York 1999.

39. Theodor Adorno would not have been surprised. He argued that the pursuit of happiness propagated by American popular commercial culture gravitates towards sexual consummation. "Alles dreht sich um den Coitus."

Europeans modern has come to mean American. Thirdly, the professionalization of their *mise en scène*. Fourth, the carnivalesque, multiethnic performance styles in a society of the spectacle.

Last but not least, American popular culture is so popular because its message to the consumers the world over resonates with the promise of consumption at American levels. From David Potter in *People of Plenty* to Daniel Boorstin in *The Democratic Experience* to James Twitchell, authors have pointed out that the average American consumes four times more than Europeans, and vastly more than the third world. This aura of abundance and of aspiration is inscribed in goods as part of their tease. In popular culture as in advertizing, utopian dreams are channeled into a myth of salvation through commodities, a promise which makes American-style commodities world-wide so attractive to the have-nots. As identity substitutes, these goods call out to their prospective customers: you are the most important thing on earth (Rosenblatt, 90). Hence American popular culture and the world of goods carries as a subplot not only the promise of personal fulfilment (from Cinderella to Pretty Baby and Forrest Gump), but also of material wealth and of the deliverance from the curse of labor. Americans have learned to take the rhetoric of excess in advertising with a grain of salt. They have acquired an immunity to the Barnumesque puffing as a subplot of their national story. They understand material promise as an open-ended, even fickle agenda or as a vanishing point to pursue. But the soteriological aura of American goods has been particularly seductive for non-Americans (who miss the puffing), particularly to those who suffer from material want. As a pragmatic charter of behavior, American popular culture projects the material utopias which are part and parcel of its civic eschatology. And yet, this exceptional promise can never become a world dream, its utopian promise of abundance simply cannot be kept. The problem is that American levels of wealth and of comfort cannot be universalized without straining the ecological limits of growth (Taylor, *passim*). "In its heyday in 1960 the USA with approximately one-fifteenth of the world's population was using about one third of the world's resources," comments Peter Taylor wryly (283). "Obviously this provides no basis for general imitation. In fact, one estimate of the carrying capacity of the world assuming an American standard of living is 600 million people, a figures passed in 1675, before the USA, let alone the American dream, was ever thought

of." But this bad news has not reached the young Tungusian boy who will, undaunted by the global limits to growth, reverse his baseball cap in anticipation of more and better things to come.

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