

James Gilbert, *Explorations of American Culture*. Uppsala North American Studies Series 2. Uppsala: ACTA Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000. 114 pages; SEK 173 paper (ISSN: 1104-0807, ISBN: 91-554-4637-x).

*Explorations of American Culture* is a compilation of nine essays presented largely in Sweden while Gilbert was a Fulbright Professor at Uppsala University. These essays bring a unique perspective on several seemingly disparate aspects of American Culture because, as many readers of *American Studies in Scandinavia* have found, American scholars living and teaching outside the US are confronted with many challenges to our assumptions. This leads to insights which are neither fully American nor European, but instead include the cultural knowledge of an insider with the awareness brought by distance and cultural difference. Comparisons between the US and Sweden, both explicit and implicit, underlie this entire body of work.

The first four essays are about the relationship between religion and science in the United States since World War Two. Gilbert argues that American religion is central to the development of a 'New Mode of Life' in America. His most interesting analysis is in connecting religious cycles to more secular aspects of American culture, labeling the United States a 'civilization of revival, restoration, and re-invention.' He further posits an 'intimate' connection between American religion and science in which both arise from market impulses to create democratic, anti-hierarchical institutions. It is this democratic market-orientation that allows American religion to maintain its vitality while Scandinavian societies become ever more secular. However, in claiming that Europeans separate the 'sacred and the secular' more than Americans do, he overstates his case. In Europe, State churches are the rule, not the exception; religious holidays are officially sanctioned as national holidays; and religion is taught in the schools. What is true is that Scandinavians have a low rate of church attendance and often see references to faith and religion by Americans as strange. It could be that the official joining together of religion and government ('the sacred and the secular') within Europe diminishes the role of individual professions of faith in popular perceptions of religion. Elaborating upon this would strengthen Gilbert's claims regarding the importance of the market-orientation of American religious institutions in increasing religiosity among Americans.

The second and third essays delve into various aspects of the relationship between religion and science. He discusses the invention of Creation Science which rejects carbon dating as science and proposes alternative explanations, such as 'Deluge Geology.' He examines how scientists, philosophers and sociologists all entered into debates with religion, with many scientists arguing that science requires a creator God and sociological methods being applied to the work of religious institutions. He finds that technology, as a by-product and part of science, has not only been accepted by most American religions but has been embraced by evangelical churches, who use it to convey their message to the masses. In fact, religion has created important scientific and social scientific innovations in the use of technology. It has also used technology to innovate culturally, so that modern forms of expression make faith appear

relevant and responsive to each generation. Even professional theologians and secular, scientific philosophers in the 1930s and 1940s eventually gave up trying to establish primacy in their debates. After twenty years of annual conferences devoted to combining religious and scientific views in understanding the world, they agreed to disagree and instead turn to projects in which both sides could contribute expertise to solve specific problems, such as social planning and race relations.

The most intriguing essay in the collection is Chapter 4. In this, Gilbert offers commentary on the role of "Creationism" in the Cold War Military. He begins by allowing the reader some insight into how a specific document – a photograph – can raise many questions in the mind of a scholar. He then explains to students in his audience how we narrow our inquiries based upon both personal and professional considerations. We hear the curiosity of the scholar as a sleuth, while discovering the painstaking work necessary to uncover the mystery. We are rewarded then with a story of how American military leaders showed films which used technology to demonstrate 'Sermons from Science' to soldiers in an attempt to quell the fears of mothers afraid of post-war delinquency and high rates of venereal disease. Science made the religious message more palatable to modern young men. He makes it clear that, to Americans, science and religion are not seen as inherently contradictory.

Gilbert then turns to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. While there is some repetition between the two chapters, Chapter 5 is clearly aimed at students of American history, illustrating methodological issues regarding how a cultural event can be studied. He discusses the intentions of organizers in planning the event. He gives evidence of attempts to control both how individuals experienced the event initially and how they remembered the occasion by limiting access to home photographers. He also discusses how historians re-invent such events in order to discuss contemporary problems.

A comparison of the 1893 Fair with events surrounding the 2001 Millennium is found in Chapter 6. He finds the tradition of constructing a unifying symbol to be ongoing and argues that displays are conscious visions of past, present and future. Discovering how racial distinctions took geographic form allows us to see the complex cultural negotiations behind the 1893 celebration. Given the market orientation of the US and important fair organizers, it is striking that all openly market-oriented activities were segregated in the ethnic/low culture area of the Fair. The 'White City' high culture area simultaneously celebrated industry and business and veiled the actual conduct of commerce, as if money were too crass to admit. Rather, industry and technology were viewed as leading to a better, more refined future. It is an interesting paradox.

The final three essays in the collection take up the theme of cultural production in a society that initially borrowed elite cultural forms from Europe, but has since rejected those forms as elitist and become a major exporter of mass culture to the rest of the world. Although part of this transition involved Europe becoming the arbiter of American cultural products and artists, the preference for mass culture and its larger audiences reflects the same market forces Gilbert discusses in his essays on American

religion. This is particularly well illustrated in his essay on American films as negotiations between the industry and the Catholic church as well as other organizations concerned with morality, in addition to consumers.

The collection ends with an important assessment of Americanization, in which Gilbert asserts that this process rarely brings American culture intact to other cultures. It is also interesting to think about his claims that what are seen as American products outside the United States often began within narrow sub-cultures. Rough edges were smoothed over in an initial process of Americanization within the United States. The international market brings even greater transformation, often to the point that Americans would no longer recognize the cultural product as American.

While each of these essays is thought-provoking on its own, presenting them in a single volume is problematic. Gilbert states at the beginning that the thread which ties all the essays together is the role of the market and the importance of democratic ideas in creating both consumer culture and political forms. This thread is more visible in some essays than others and they remain fairly disconnected from each other. Other problems are apparent, too. Without extensive editing to join them together, the reader is left with a significant amount of repetition. Also, at times, the essays seem to contradict each other, as in his assessment of opinion polls as evidence of religious beliefs. Chapter 1 points out the biases of the polls, which he says are designed to find high rates of religious belief. He argues that this makes them more useful for comparing across time since the biases remain stable, than as actual measures of belief. Yet Chapter 2 claims these same polls give an accurate picture of Americans' actual religious beliefs.

The strengths of this work are also, in part, its weakness. The essay format allows Gilbert to raise broader questions. These questions would be of greater interest to his audience for public lectures than a more narrowly defined research monograph. But raising such issues in a limited space and format sometimes tends toward hyperbole and statements that claim more than can be documented. This collection builds on extreme views of American exceptionalism and celebrates American uniqueness, making such claims as 'Nowhere in the Americas or even, perhaps, in the world, has there been such sectarian creativity – nowhere else have so many new religions appeared and thrived...'. Tacking on '... – certainly not in the modern era' allows only those with knowledge of history to understand that ancient Greece is being left out. But even that caveat ignores the religious creativity of Asia in both ancient and modern times.

Despite these flaws, this collection of essays is a valuable contribution to our understanding of American culture. The comparison to certain aspects of Scandinavian culture is helpful in expanding our view. And the connections between religion and science, technology, cultural forms of production and the marketplace are well-done.