THE AMERICAN SELF

Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture

EDITED BY Sam B. Girgus

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS
Albuquerque

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

The American self.

Includes bibliographical references.
1. United States—Civilization—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. United States—Popular culture—Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. National characteristics, American—Addresses, essays, lectures.
I. Girgus, Sam B., 1941–
E169.1.A482 973 80-52281
ISBN 0-8263-0557-1

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 80-52281
International Standard Book Number 0-8263-0557-1 (clothbound)
International Standard Book Number 0-8263-0646-2 (paperbound)
Manufactured in the United States of America.
First paperbound printing 1982

To Scottie

Preface to the Paperback Edition

The American Self Today: A Crisis of Belief

In the American experience the terms *myth* and *ideology* tend to merge. The myth of America—our cultural symbols and narratives of promise and renewal—inevitably has an ideological counterpart that consists of the historical and political uses of the myth. The unprecedented identification of a nation and culture with an ideological system of beliefs and action helped create the idea of a new kind of human being in the person of the American self. This vision of a unique American self that stands as a symbol of freedom and hope goes back at least to Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. It achieves its most enthusiastic expression in the work of Walt Whitman, who saw in America "A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,/ A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with new contests,/ New politics, new literatures and religions, inventions and arts." For Whitman, of course, the myth and ideology of America functioned as a source of hope and renewal in the consciousness of the people. At the same time, he was not blind to the possibility that the myth and ideology of America could be exploited and abused. Like a true Jeremiah of the American Way he worried about "ruin and defection" and saw that "the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us."

For many today the only recognizable part of Whitman's picture of America is this sense of a dream turned into a nightmare and of a garden corrupted into Fitzgerald's "valley of ashes." To many the myth and ideology of America belong to a simpler age. Today's list of unanswered questions involving feminism and the family, urban paralysis, Sun Belt conservatism, frustrated minorities, and tense international relations seems absolutely beyond the domain of the climate and atmosphere that nurtured the American Way. In this light the myth and ideology of America function like rhetorical strategies for figures as different as Ronald Reagan and Barry Commoner and for special interest groups ranging from major corporations to welfare mothers. To many observers such political and

intellectual discourse exposes the myth and ideology of America as a patina of stereotypes and slogans that dissimulates the nihilism and waste of our new values and character.

Maybe. Perhaps the idea of America finally has caught up with the obituaries that have been written about it almost from its inception. However, before our putative national identity gets buried for good beneath continuing waves of faddish cynicism, it might be well to remember that much of American history and culture has been made out of the tension between our idealistic rhetoric of mission and the reality of our actions. As Jefferson and Whitman understood it, the tension was so structured as to allow for change, flexibility, and growth—even significant disruption—without bringing down the whole system. The conflicts between ideal and fact, symbolic and social history, ideology and reality are inherent in the American Way. Thus, the question of the viability and relevance of the myth and ideology of America cannot be separated from questions about the nature of the American self. Myth and ideology achieve their sanctity from the psychic approval of a people who see themselves in their own beliefs. Philip Rieff describes culture as a balance between corresponding systems of "moral demands" and systems of "expressive remissions" or releases. For Rieff "the death of a culture" becomes certain when its "normative institutions" and ideals are no longer "inwardly compelling." Similarly, we can prophesy the end of a culture that sees itself primarily in images of an endless concatenation of woes. Thoreau's argument that anyone who tries "to live by luck" throws away his life also can be maintained for a culture as a whole. Our future may consist, as Lionel Trilling once feared, of "visions of losses worse than that of existence—losses of civilization, personality, humanness." However, as individuals and as a nation we cannot be held responsible for the unknowable. We can only be accountable for our actions in using what we know and believe in our confrontation with the present and our anticipation of the future. Throughout our history the myth and ideology of America vivified what Sacvan Bercovitch terms the rhetoric and ritual of consensus that helped to make the past understandable and the future conceivable. In an age of brutal ideological alternatives, there is another side to the idea that the symbol of America offers only the sanctuary of a false consciousness. It remains possible that by denying the relevant meaning of our history and national conscience we run from the best potential in ourselves.

Sam B. Girgus
May 1982

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Introduction: American Studies and the American Self

American Studies was born in controversy and nurtured in dissent. From the beginning the legitimacy of studying American culture and character as a separate and distinct subject area was challenged. Nevertheless the idea of studying America as a special culture and the American as a unique "self" or character type gained momentum during the 1920s. Throughout the twenties and thirties this attitude toward American culture grew as scholars worked within their own disciplines. Thus, the founding of *American Literature* and the writing of the *Literary History of the United States* helped pave the way for what would become another controversy over the acceptance of a need to study the culture from an interdisciplinary perspective. With the growth of an interdisciplinary way of thinking and working, many scholars went into American Studies with a vision of themselves as academic renegades and rebels working on the new frontiers of culture studies and scholarly thought. At a national convention one former president of the American Studies Association described American Studies as a tribe of nomads whose tents could be found outside established disciplines and departments. Others saw the movement less dramatically but as still inherently innovative and somewhat irreverent because of its nature as the interdisciplinary study of a dynamic and pluralistic culture and society.

While interdisciplinary studies grew in respectability in the early 1950s, the use by American Studies scholars of symbol and myth and of intellectual history as ways of studying the culture generated new academic debate. Such debate developed interest in American Studies while also encouraging members of traditional disciplines and departments to alter and expand their own intellectual horizons and academic methodologies. Later changes in the culture during the 1960s and 1970s were reflected in

new methods and approaches involving ethnic, regional, and women studies. These developments along with the emergence of social history and popular culture have caused something of a renaissance of interest in American Studies and a revolution of traditional methodologies.

Accordingly, the essays collected here demonstrate the development of both American culture and American Studies. While they indicate how American Studies has developed a diversity of approaches, methodologies, and concerns, the essays also show how many scholars in the field have retained their original interest in myth and ideology as a means for understanding American culture and character. The first group of essays in the collection reflects more traditional approaches to American Studies. Using sources primarily from literary and intellectual history, Sacvan Bercovitch of Columbia University establishes the tone for the collection with his opening essay on the myth of America and the ideology of consensus. The essay constitutes a new look at the Puritan experience as a whole and offers new insights into the impact of the Puritans upon American culture and history. In many ways, including its conclusions about the myth and ideology of America and contemporary culture, the essay expands upon Bercovitch's celebrated and seminal earlier works on the Puritan experience. In addition, it also includes detailed bibliographical material. Thus the essay is a new statement from Bercovitch and an important contribution to scholarship that provides an introduction and background to themes about American culture and character that are developed in the other original essays in the collection. Henry Nash Smith of the University of California, Berkeley, expands on the idea of an American ideology through his argument that Howells' commitment to "the standard American ideology" as represented by middle-class values and perspectives impeded his ability to create truly modern fiction. In Smith's study the work of Howells exemplifies Bercovitch's thesis concerning the significance of ideological consensus to the American imagination. By the twenties, according to Alan Trachtenberg of Yale University, modernism in America was presenting "an alternative way of life." In an article that demonstrates the importance of myth and symbol to the history of American Studies, Trachtenberg reexamines "the subjective features" of the Brooklyn Bridge and how it influenced the poetry, painting and photography of the period. However, even in this explosive time, American artists often seemed to see their work in terms of a unique American self and vision that related to a common cultural tradition and a "usable past."

George Arms, who has represented American Studies at the University of New Mexico for several decades, broadens the concept of ideology by introducing the element of religion into the discussion with his analysis of the complexity of Howells' religious thought and experience. Arms' view of Howells provides an interesting contrast with the earlier picture pre-

sented by Smith and demonstrates how different critics can view one writer's ideology in widely different ways. Through his use of intellectual history, Ferenc Szasz of the Department of History of the University of New Mexico shows that in America religious belief does not come from just the cultural and intellectual elite but from all elements of the society. In his delineation of the explosion of religious movements at the grassroots level, Szasz develops a fascinating social and cultural portrait of America from 1880 to 1915.

In recent years many scholars have focused their interests on ethnic, regional, and women studies. My essay concentrates on the impact of Jewish writers and thinkers upon the myth of America, while Houston Baker, Jr., of the University of Pennsylvania argues that an understanding of works of Afro-American literature in terms of mythic and symbolic potency can significantly improve our understanding of these works. Baker's essay is an attempt to free black literature from the misconceptions that have been imposed upon it. Peter Lupsha of the University of New Mexico Department of Political Science asks, "What's American about American crime?" He answers that what is perceived as a basically lawless American environment creates a "sucker" mentality in which the fear of the confidence man becomes a self-justification for crime as a form of defense.

In an essay that relates women studies and oral history to the social history of the frontier, Lillian Schlissel of Brooklyn College adds another dimension to our study of ideology by analyzing the connection between the expectations of Victorian ideology and the need for women on the frontier to change their traditional roles and self-images. Another picture of women on the frontier is presented by Shelley Armitage, a University of New Mexico graduate student in American Studies, who uses a methodology derived from popular culture studies, literary analysis, and social history to argue that the cattle frontier inspired the creation in the popular imagination of "perhaps the only true American heroine"—the cowgirl or "rawhide heroine."

The importance of popular culture studies to American Studies is further demonstrated by John Cawelti of the University of Kentucky. Cawelti believes that recent shifts in patterns of popular narrative in the media of print, film, and television may indicate significant changes in popular values and consciousness. He discerns the emergence of new mythic patterns centering on sexual liberation and domination, catastrophe and vengeance. Such shifts may signal the beginning of a final breakdown of the long-lasting American consensus that Bercovitch's opening essay addressed. Robert Sklar of New York University traces the evolution in Frank Capra's movies of the hero figure, especially as it culminates in *It's A Wonderful Life*. In the movie (which Sklar does not discuss in his book *Movie-Made America*), Sklar says, Capra felt the need for divine intervention to save

the hero as opposed to the usual populist solutions in his films. According to Sklar, the movie indicates Capra's sense of the decline of liberty and individualism in America. For James Barbour and William Dowling of the New Mexico Department of English, sports, myth, and popular culture come together in the genre of the baseball autobiography. In *Ball Four* the writer's life and his relationship to his culture become the major game. For Barbour and Dowling, Jim Bouton represents aspects of American life and character for his time and place. Sources from popular culture are integrated into Marta Weigle's study of the folklore of New Mexico. Her article continues her examination of one of the most fascinating aspects of the culture of New Mexico—the mysterious brotherhood of the Penitentes. Weigle holds a joint appointment in the Departments of English and Anthropology at New Mexico.

The essay by Walter Blair of the University of Chicago relates Mark Twain the writer and humorist to Twain the public entertainer and demonstrates how reading Twain aloud can serve as an important "key to appreciating him" by helping the listener to train "the mind's ear" to understand more fully the complexity of Twain's artistry. Blair's approach to American culture through the study of American humor has been a basic element of American Studies for the past fifty years. The final essay by Joel Jones of American Studies deals primarily with the question of methodology and offers his perspective on the pluralistic, eclectic, and experimental philosophy of American Studies. The essay indicates how American Studies evolved into the diversity of approaches and interests that are reflected in this book. The convergence in this collection of a multiplicity of perspectives and methods on basic American themes and issues demonstrates the growth of American Studies as an academic tradition. However, like a modern painting, the collection also renders through its many parts a coherent view of the culture as a whole.

Finally, it should be noted that the book grew out of a lecture series and other presentations sponsored by the Department of American Studies. The quality of the lectures and the enthusiastic response to them led me to invite contributions from others who also have worked in-depth on a prolonged basis with our students. Accordingly, the book indicates something of the nature and history of American Studies at the University of New Mexico. It demonstrates a commitment over a span of generations that continues today as younger scholars and students open and explore new fields for learning and research.

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The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual, and the Ideology of American Consensus

Sacvan Bercovitch

> the semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society: *myth is depoliticized speech*. One must naturally understand *political* in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of remaking the world; one must above all give an active value to the prefix *de-*: here it represents an operational movement . . . it is the bourgeois ideology itself, the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world . . . [so that] the basic idea of a perfectible mobile world produces the inverted image of an unchanging humanity, characterized by an indefinite repetition of its identity.
>
> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

My first encounter with American consensus was in the late sixties, when I crossed the border into the United States and found myself inside the myth of America. Not of North America, for the myth stopped short at the Canadian and Mexican borders, but of a country that despite its arbitrary frontiers, despite its bewildering mix of race and creed, could believe in something called the True America, and could invest that patent fiction with all the moral and emotional appeal of a religious symbol. It was as though a special lunacy had stormed the general optimism of the land. Here was the Jewish anarchist Paul Goodman berating the

Midwest for abandoning the promise; here, the descendant of American slaves, Martin Luther King, denouncing injustice as a violation of the American Way; here, an endless debate about national destiny, full of rage and faith, conservatives scavenging for un-Americans, New Left historians recalling the country to its sacred mission. Their problem was not what's usually called identity. These people never asked "Who are we?" but, as though deliberately avoiding that commonsense question, "When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?" And their answers invariably joined celebration and lament in reaffirming the dream.

Nothing in my Canadian background had prepared me for that spectacle. I say this gratefully, to acknowledge the benefits of cultural shock in American studies. It gave me something of an anthropologist's sense of wonder at the symbols of the tribe. Mexico may have been the land of gold, and Canada might be the Dominion of the North; but America was a venture in exegesis. You were supposed to discover it as a believer unveils scripture. America's meaning was implicit in its destiny, and its destiny was manifest to all who had the grace to discover its meaning. To a Canadian skeptic, a gentile in God's Country, it made for a breathtaking scene: a pluralistic, pragmatic people openly living in a dream, bound together by an ideological consensus unmatched by any other modern society.

Let me repeat that mundane phrase: *ideological consensus*. For it wasn't the idea of exceptionalism that I discovered in '68. That I *had* heard about in Canada, through the works of "consensus historians." What I discovered had to do not with historiography, but (in Roland Barthes' sense of the word) with mythology. It was a hundred sects and factions, each apparently different from the others, yet all celebrating the same mission; a vast *Pequod*'s crew of self-declared isolatoes, joined together in a deafening *concordia discors*. Ideology in this sense is perhaps a narrower concept than those usually associated with "America," but a more helpful one. It speaks of the day-to-day *uses* of myth. It reminds us that myth gains substance from its relation to facts, that it reflects and affects particular social needs, and that it persists through its capacity to influence people in history. Thus, although the consensus I refer to is not a measure of what census-takers call society, and although its function has been to mystify or mask social realities, nonetheless it denotes something equally "real": a system of values, symbols, and beliefs, and a series of rituals designed to keep the system going. So, it seemed to me, the rhetoric of mission served ten years ago. What was lost, I realized, in that endless debate about America was the fact that the debate itself was part of a long-ripened mode of socialization. And in trying to make sense of my discovery, I found myself back in the rhetoric of the antebellum North.[1] It was there the myth was established; there the rituals of God's country were completed and sanctified.

My purpose here is to explore, so as to expose, the nature of that con-

sensus. I use the terms ritual and ideology, accordingly, in their broadest sense, to mean the forms and strategies through which the culture justified its ways and sought to enforce its norms. My major landmarks are the Revolution and the Civil War; but part of the terrain is the long foreground to revolution. I assume, with many recent historians, that the Civil War was the result of a gradual consolidation of ideological forces, a process that reflected the steady (if often turbulent) growth of middle-class American culture. I assume, further, that the meaning of America was not God-given but man-made, that the men who made it were not prophets but spokesmen for a certain social order, and that the rhetoric of consensus, which helped sustain and mold the social order, originated in colonial New England. A long foreground, as I said, but crucial to an understanding of my subject, and so I begin with a brief account of New England's errand into free enterprise.

I trust that this view of the Puritan errand won't seem to overstrain the worn links between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. What I would suggest is simply that certain elements in Puritanism lent themselves powerfully to that conjunction, and precisely those elements came to the fore when the Massachusetts Bay emigrants, a group drawn mainly from the entrepreneurial and professional middle classes (tradesmen, lawyers, artisans, clerics, and merchants) severed their ties with the feudal forms of Old England and set up a comparatively fluid society on the American strand—a society that devalued aristocracy, denounced beggary, and, despite its traditions of deference, opened up political and economic opportunities to a relatively broad spectrum of the population. All this has been amply documented. A recent *New Yorker* cartoon has one Puritan emigrant say to another, as they disembark from the *Arbella*, "My immediate goal is freedom of religion, but my long-range plan is to get into real estate." No doubt Tocqueville had something like that in mind when he wrote, in a famous passage of 1835, that the "whole destiny of America is contained in the first Puritan who landed on these shores, as that of the whole human race in the first man."[2]

Tocqueville was making the point by hyperbole, but the point itself is valid enough to suggest a general difference between New England and other modern communities. In Europe, capitalism evolved dialectically, through conflict with earlier and persisting ways of thought and belief. It was an emerging force in a complex cultural design. Basically, New England bypassed the conflict. This is by no means to say that conflict was avoided altogether. The first century of New England was a remarkable instance of rapid social change, involving widespread social and moral tensions. But by and large those tensions marked transitional stages in the growth of the dominant culture. They signified not a contest between an established and an evolving system, as in Europe, but a troubled period of maturation. There were overlays of earlier agrarian patterns of life, but

these did not offer the obstacles to modernization that peasant culture did (say) in pre-Revolutionary France. There were vestiges of folk customs, and assertions of aristocratic privilege, but these found no soil in which to take root; they showed none of the stubborn and substantive resistance to bourgeois values that Keith Thomas has found among the lower classes—or Christopher Hill among the aristocracy—of seventeenth-century Britain. Conflict there was in Puritan New England, but no place or period better illustrates Eric Hobsbawm's dictum that "the value of studies of major aspects of society are inversely proportional to our concentration on brief moments of conflict."[3]

For in all major aspects, New England was an outpost of the modern world from the start. Capitalism came there, in Carl Degler's phrase, "in the first ships"; or as Max Weber put it, "the spirit of capitalism . . . was present [there] before the capitalistic order," and "no medieval antecedents or complicating institutional heritage [intervened] to mitigate the impact of the Protestant Ethic on American [middle class] economic development."[4] On the contrary, in their revolt against Old World antecedents, the Puritans brought with them a sense of purpose that facilitated the process of modernization in crucial ways. They were only one of many groups of emigrants, from Jamestown to Philadelphia, that brought the spirit of capitalism to the New World; but more than any others it was they who gave that spirit a distinctive New World identity—gave it a local habitation, America, and a name, the New England Way, and an ideology that would in time fuse both terms in providing a distinctive rhetoric for the major free enterprise culture of the modern world. New England evolved from its own origins into the American Way, because from the start the colony was knit together, ideologically, by the concept of an errand into the wilderness.

It's that ideological function of the errand I want to stress. Considered as theology, the Puritan errand was a radical skewing of Christian tradition to fit the fantasies of a particular sect. Considered as ideology, it was a mode of consensus designed to fill the needs of a certain social order. Let me take a moment to explain the basic tenets of consensus in the Puritans' own terms. By errand they meant, first of all, *migration*—not simply from one place to another, but from a depraved Old World to a New Canaan. Properly speaking, they explained, the "new-ness" of their New World was prophetic: it signaled the long-awaited new heaven and new earth of the millennium. The desert land they were reclaiming had its past in Bible promises: America was there so that in due time they could make it blossom as the rose. In other words, they used the biblical myth of exodus and conquest to justify imperialism before the fact. The Puritans sometimes appear as isolationists, but basically they were as eager as any other group of emigrants for land and gain. The difference was that they managed more effectively to explain away their greed. Other peo-