

American Cultural Studies

An introduction
to American culture

Neil Campbell
and Alasdair Kean



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To borrow a particular quotation from Deleuze and Guattari seems appropriate for this book: 'The two of us wrote [the book]. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd' (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, 1992 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: The Athlone Press).

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Introduction

Extend the dialogue. Deepen the definitions – for the sake of our sanity. Let your new insight become. A social science concerned with the whole of society would have to be historical, environmental, multivocal, as well as philosophical.

(Harding 1988: 81–2)

In this book we aim to explore modern American culture from an 'American Studies' position, which espouses an interdisciplinary approach to our chosen themes. We will explore a range of potential ways to study American culture, in order to encourage students, who may have little experience either of America or interdisciplinary work, to develop their engagement with both of these in tandem. Our focus is largely on the twentieth-century experience, but where appropriate, for instance, in the chapter on regions or on African Americans, we have included material from earlier periods in order to provide an important context or sense of continuity.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PLACE OR WHAT IS AMERICA?

American Studies, as an approach to the study of the culture and history of the United States, has, since its inception in the 1930s, been preoccupied with two key themes. The first is what Michael Denning has described as the founding question of the subject area, 'What is American?' (Denning 1986: 360). This question has been phrased in different ways, but whatever its wording, it has been concerned with the meaning of American national identity, and the ways in which America might be distinguished from other nations. In its strongest form this has involved the effort to establish what has been unique about the American experience. The second is what Linda Kerber has described as an impatience with disciplinary boundaries, and an openness to experimentation in academic inquiry (Kerber 1989: 416). American Studies from the beginning has been concerned to explore the possibilities of cooperation between practitioners from different disciplines, and even to develop an interdisciplinary

methodology, with its own distinctive working practices. In this introduction, we want to discuss a range of implications which follow from these two themes in a way which will prove helpful to students who are embarking on the study of American culture and at the same time are beginning the difficult but always rewarding process of moving beyond conventional approaches.

Gauging the Americanness of the United States is, as J.G. Blair has noted, a venerable goal for American Studies (Blair 1988). Its importance as a central concern within American Studies, of course, has deep roots within American history itself. J.H. St John de Crevecoeur's famous question, 'What, then, is the American, this new man?', first posed in 1782, has echoed down subsequent generations of social and political commentary by both Americans and foreigners addressing the question of American identity. From Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and 1840s through the founding fathers of American history like Frederick Jackson Turner, to post-Second World War cultural critics like David Riesman and Christopher Lasch, a considerable literature has built up dedicated to defining American character. American Studies, therefore, as the search for 'American exceptionalism', for some sense of the differences between American culture and other cultures, has come out of a deep-seated preoccupation with national self-definition. Even if American culture, on analysis, may turn out to be less distinctive from other modern societies than was once thought, one feature of it remains the durability of questions about a national identity. Indeed, as some commentators have argued, the centrality of the debate about American distinctiveness in America may in itself be a key component of American identity: 'The search for an American character is part of that character' (Wilkinson 1988: 2).

However, in recent years, the quest for a distinctive national character has come under increasing criticism. Analyses of 'American exceptionalism', it is argued, 'are less credible than ever in the 1990s' (Lipsitz 1990: 616). Criticisms of this kind have tended to focus on two central weaknesses in many earlier attempts to define national difference. There is, first, the tendency to reduce questions of national identity to some essential singularity and in doing so to give undue weight to the experience of specific groups and traditions in explaining America, at the expense of other groups whose experience is, as a result, forgotten or marginalised. Second, there has been a tendency to study American society in isolation, and in so doing to downplay those experiences which the United States might have in common with other societies.

If we turn to the first major criticism, then the difficulties of generalising about national identity become evident. Americans, it has been overwhelmingly argued over the last thirty years, have been marked by division and opposition, rather than by agreement and consensus. Traditional conceptions of a unified American culture when examined turn out

to be partial and selective views of what America has been or ought to be, grounded in the privileged status accorded to a white, male, middle-class perspective. America could be presented as a classless society, marked by a powerful degree of consensus and a low level of conflict only because historians and cultural critics had tended not to emphasise those factors which indicated deep-seated divisions in American life, such as class, ethnicity, race and gender. Once these factors have been duly acknowledged, then, at the very least, it becomes much more difficult to accommodate them adequately within traditional notions of national identity. Americans, it is argued, are in the end divided as much as they are united. Where unity is apparent, this is only possible because difference has been hidden by the practice of power. The dominance of specific groups and perspectives in American life has obscured the fact that other groups were subordinate, and played little part in creating an American identity. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote, 'the last two decades have . . . witnessed a growing restiveness with any complacent assumptions that the culture of a privileged few could adequately represent the specific beliefs and practices of the many varieties of Americans' (Fox-Genovese 1990: 7). The construction of an American identity could thus no longer rely on a few privileged categories; Americans were 'female as well as male, black as well as white, poor as well as affluent, Catholic or Jewish as well as Protestant, and of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds' (ibid.).

A second major source of criticism has focused on a tendency in American Studies to examine American culture on its own without very much attention to cross-cultural comparison.¹ The emphasis here tended to be on what set the United States apart from other cultures rather than what it might share with them. This approach, in turn, both fed off and encouraged that long-held belief in American history that the country had a special mission to fulfil, a mission which in the past had a strong religious, economic or racial gloss, but was now given renewed vigour by America's ideological role as the leader of the free world in the Cold War. There are links between this argument and the tendency to underplay conflict in the American past for, as Giles Gunn has commented, 'wherever concern for American uniqueness was seen to wax, critical comprehension of its own inner divisions as well as its cultural complexity and contextual relations seemed to wane' (Gunn 1987: 151). Again, this tendency drew on an understandable strain in American culture which sought to explain the country's identity in American terms. Frederick Jackson Turner's elaboration of his Frontier thesis is only the most well-known attempt to provide an explanation of American development in terms of conditions within the country itself (see Chapter 5).

What these various criticisms of 'American exceptionalism' suggest are the problems involved in generalising about the American experience. This is not to deny that the national dimension of historical and cultural

analysis is significant, nor is it to dismiss the extensive literature on the American character, which, in any case, was rather more sensitive to matters of region and ethnicity than has sometimes been argued. It is, however, to emphasise that students, in seeking to understand American culture, need to take into account both internal variation and division as well as international and cross-cultural comparison. One of the aims of this book, then, is to encourage students both to become aware of these internal divisions and at the same time to consider how they relate to conventional or accepted definitions of American identity.

WHAT IS AMERICAN STUDIES?

If the problematic nature of national identity is one major concern which recent inquiry in American Studies has addressed, a second is the process of interdisciplinary work. It may be helpful here to say something about what we mean by interdisciplinarity and in so doing to identify some of the benefits as well as potential problems involved in this kind of approach. American Studies, as practised both in the United States and abroad, has long advocated movement beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and encouraged efforts to establish more open and cooperative projects between academic areas. As might be expected, however, such an enterprise has had a controversial and much disputed life, for a whole range of reasons, particularly in the last twenty years when the very nature of what we mean by an academic discipline has come under scrutiny from a number of different directions.² It is not our intention here to provide a review of this work; students who wish to follow its contours may be guided by the material in the notes and the suggestions for further reading. Rather, we want to open up areas of debate, and thus possible avenues of cultural exploration for students to develop in their own projects. In the individual chapters which follow, rather than providing interpretative overviews of the topics concerned, our aim is to suggest a range of potential approaches to American culture. What follows, then, by way of discussion of interdisciplinary issues, is a starting-point or a place of departure.

Central to any interdisciplinary enterprise is the relationship between texts to be studied and the contexts from which they come. There are two main issues to examine here. One is what we mean by 'texts'. Traditional approaches based on the study of literature, history and politics, tended to favour certain kinds of texts at the expense of others, presenting an established canon of great works from which might be distilled the essence of American culture. Certain kinds of texts were appropriate for sustained examination while others were not. The debate over what should be included in the canon has been hotly contested in recent years and is clearly related to the issues raised in the opening stages of this introduction. Whose America is reflected in any specific list of texts for close

study? Can the works of key writers in themselves provide an adequate guide to the complexities of a culture as varied and as divided as that of the United States? Are certain kinds of texts worth more than others because they are more complex or contain particular revelatory or inspirational qualities? In attempting to come to terms with these questions, our approach has been to retain an emphasis on the importance of certain forms of literary and artistic production which seem to us to require sustained and careful reading, but at the same time not to limit ourselves to what has been traditionally included in such a category. For one thing, what might be defined as 'elite' or 'high' culture has clearly changed over time. Lawrence Levine's work on the emergence of cultural distinctions in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America is a salutary reminder that the status of texts and writers is not fixed but has varied according to the pressure of specific historical events (Levine 1988).

If we define culture at its broadest as 'a way of life', then it also becomes clear that to restrict the study of cultural products to a small handful of approved texts runs the risk of omitting a great deal. One recent suggestion takes the opposite position; texts are simply 'those stories that Americans tell one another in order to make sense of their lives' (Mechling 1989: 4). According to this definition, then, a whole range of cultural products and artefacts become available for analysis. It may still be that in such a scheme of study there remains room for qualitative judgement, that some stories carry greater conviction and resonance than others, but the possibilities for making connections between different aspects of the wider culture are greatly extended. The opening up of different kinds of texts for scrutiny, too, may yield surprising results. Listening closely to the stories they tell and how those stories fit with other stories in the culture may reveal specific texts in the popular domain which repay close study, and which are as questioning and as complex as more ostensibly serious works. In this collection, therefore, while retaining a strong emphasis on the works of a range of established writers from Edgar Allan Poe to Toni Morrison, we have also juxtaposed them with material from other sources including popular culture, photography, art, music, film and material artefacts. Moreover, in making connections between different texts, it might be argued that new kinds of texts are created which themselves can be read and interpreted. An example here might be the description of the city as a text, which can be read in a range of different ways, but which itself is made up of a range of different texts or stories.

If the concept of a text is open to redefinition, then so too is the concept of context or 'history'. The implications of recent work in cultural theory for the discipline of history are considerable and remind us that written history is shaped and crafted in order to represent events to the reader, just as fiction is. Conventional notions of history as an empirically based quest for the truth about the past have been criticised as having an

unquestioning and innocent approach to methodological and epistemological issues. Many of these criticisms are undoubtedly polemical in tone, and in their determination to make a theoretical case tend to ignore the sophistication, range and depth of much recent historical work. Ironically, they sometimes rely on particular versions of the past or models of historical interpretation which that work has undermined.³ Despite this tendency, however, it is nevertheless helpful to identify some of the central points in recent work on the philosophy of history, for they suggest ways of encouraging links between history and other disciplines in the humanities in a way which opens doors to interdisciplinary work.⁴ These points may be summarised as follows:

- 1 There is a critical distinction between 'the past' and 'history'.
- 2 History in the end is made by historians, defined here to include not just professional historians but all those who are interested in making some sense of the past. For example, an American historian like Frederick Jackson Turner established a narrative of Western history that sought to explain not just that region of the nation, but the entire make-up of a national character.
- 3 History as a discourse is a construct which cannot comprehend the whole of the past. The past, in its totality, is simply too big, too various, to encompass in any one account.
- 4 History, therefore, is made up of a range of different accounts of the past and we come to the past through its different histories, and it is these histories which we must weigh against each other as we seek to make sense of the past. There is no accurate and unchanging historical record of the past out there against which we can check our stories for their truth. Thus new feminist or ethnic histories must be explored against the more 'traditional' male-centred constructions of historians like Jackson Turner.
- 5 Because history is a partial account of the past, it is subject to the same pressures as other stories; it is written according to certain conventions and rules and employs a range of narrative devices, which may be explicit or implicit. The historian communicates by employing a range of strategies which are commonly thought of as the province of the novelist, such as metaphor, repetition, personification, closure and others. The same is true, of course, of the documentary materials which the historian consults.
- 6 These narratives are themselves contested, that is, they are in a dynamic relationship with each other. Particular kinds of narratives may have predominated at specific times, because they were the expression of dominant cultural forms or political systems. Other narratives remained unconstructed or silenced because they were not admitted into the dominant culture. Thus, until recently, Native Americans and African

Americans have been silenced in history by a process that has denied them an authoritative historical voice.

- 7 Histories are written by historians who themselves are located in a specific social context, and whose observations, interpretations and judgements are partly shaped by the conceptual categories they bring to their task.

It now may be possible to see how issues to do with the concept of an unproblematic national culture mesh with methodological questions over what kinds of texts are worthy of scrutiny, and how these texts in turn link with the process of historical inquiry. An openness to a range of textual material – to include, for instance, popular as well as high culture, imaginative as well as documentary material, novels or films as well as histories – may open up the question of national identity and how it has been made, which moves beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, and instead posits a range of competing discourses as the focus of analysis. Thus an event like the quincentennial of Columbus in 1992 was contested by different interpretations of the meanings of the ‘discovery/conquest’ of America (see Chapter 2). It should be emphasised here, however, that our argument is not to represent history as the same as fiction. Historians have to engage with something which exists outside of the imagination, namely the past, and as David Lowenthal emphasises, the historian should not

knowingly . . . invent or exclude things that affect his conclusions . . . he dare not fabricate a character, ascribe unknown traits so as to make his tale more intelligible, because he could neither hide such inventions from others with access to the public record nor justify them when found out.

(Lowenthal 1985: 229)

Novelists or film-makers, by contrast, are not constrained by the need to marshal, test and shape evidence. They need make no claim to having wrestled with the facts of the past or to having adopted a neutral or disinterested approach to their chosen material. Their story aims to touch the emotions and senses through the power of the written word, to communicate feeling. But despite this important difference, both fiction and history use language as rhetoric (that is, language designed to persuade or impress) and it is this attention to the form in which texts are expressed that allows us to link what might be described as the study of institutions with the study of culture.

USING THE BOOK

In what follows we have not used the same mode of analysis in each chapter, since investigations of different themes or topics clearly demand

different approaches. This book is not, as we have stressed, a survey or an attempt to write a textbook with all the answers. As Michael Fischer has written, 'the text is not hermetically sealed, but points beyond itself' (in Clifford and Marcus 1986: 201). This book points to many other areas of study, avenues of exploration and research. Thus Chapter 6 on 'The American City' takes what might be described as a post-structuralist approach to the city as a text whose meanings are constantly shifting and unfixable, whereas Chapter 7 analyses the ways in which gender has defined power relations at work in America. We have, however, developed a self-conscious and explicit description of the practices we have adopted in the various chapters, as part of those chapters themselves. We have also included discussions of texts in a little more detail than a conventional survey would allow, again in an attempt to suggest possible approaches to a range of interdisciplinary textual material. The texts chosen for this purpose are not meant to be representative but, rather, to be helpful examples of what can be done through this kind of work.

At the end of each chapter we have provided concrete suggestions for follow-up work that will allow students to develop their own approaches to the topics concerned. Works cited in each chapter indicate a range of textual materials which might be used for further study. What we would encourage in these chapters, then, is what Fred Inglis has recently described as 'the theory of open-mindedness' which honours the plurality of perspectives, relishes the varieties of intellectual experience, acknowledges the location and uncertainty of old knowledge itself (Inglis 1993: 227). At the same time, however, we also want to encourage students to explore some of the ways in which difference is connected to issues of power expressed through history, that 'the inherited notion of American culture is the product of historical struggles that have been won by some and lost by others' and that it is important to study the interaction between differing individuals and forces (Fox-Genovese 1990: 27).

CRITICAL APPROACHES

For the remainder of this introduction, we will present, in more detail, some of the approaches we see as informing the chapters that make up this book. It is our intention to begin with an overview of some of the concepts that structure and influence individual chapters and provide a certain amount of explanation and context for these approaches. We have tried to explain them in the particular contexts in which they will be used in this book and provide, through the notes and reading lists, ways of continuing the process started here through individual projects. It is important to emphasise, however, that individual chapters, with their specific applications of these critical approaches, will put the flesh and bones onto the skeleton assembled here.