theories and methodologies

Cosmic American Studies

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THERE IS NOT ONLY AN EXISTENTIAL POIGNANCY BUT ALSO AN INTELLECTUAL PIQUANCY TO THE 1950 SUICIDE NOTE OF F. O. MATTHIESSEN, one of the founders of American studies: "I am depressed over world conditions. I am a Christian and a Socialist. I am against any order which interferes with that objective" ("F. O. Matthiessen"). Matthiessen attributed his fateful decision to a situation—the Cold War—in which it increasingly seemed difficult to assert credibly and pursue effectively a socialist agenda without being presumed or pressured to hold commitments to materialism, atheism, and secularism. The dominant narrative of American studies is that the Cold War gave the field its life—the ideological impetus and institutional infrastructure to produce and peddle a sophisticated version of American exceptionalism (Radway 47–49; Wise 308–12). But Matthiessen's tragic case suggests instead that the Cold War may have killed American studies, at least a possible version of it. Matthiessen's fatal dilemma, I want respectfully to suggest, might instruct us how to reconstruct the history and future of a field whose "bread-and-butter concerns" have always included religion (Stein and Murison 1; cf. Modern). Matthiessen's political credentials as a socialist were bona fide, and his intellectual inclinations were toward deep historicist analysis, but he couldn't commit to Marxism, despite his frank acknowledgment of its indispensable contribution not only to intellectual culture but also to his own thinking.[1] Clearly, personal religious reasons played a role—"I am a Christian, not through upbringing but by conviction, and I find any materialism inadequate" (Matthiessen, "Education" 180). But I want to underscore Matthiessen's intellectual objections, which arose from the evidence of his historical inquiry into American literature and culture. That is to say, I want to distinguish between how his theological convictions may have prejudiced him against Marxism's secularist teleology and how his scholarly investigation of American literature and culture raised legitimate questions about Marxism's implicit secularization narrative. In reviews of the Marxist literary histories of his Ameri-

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canist colleagues V. F. Calverton and Granville Hicks, Matthiessen complained of their inability to comprehend what he called "the main development of religious idealism from Edwards through the transcendental movement" and "the strain of affirmation of the ideal that runs from the seventeenth century to the twentieth" (*Responsibilities* 187, 195). The secularist premises of Marxist analysis—at least in the crude form espoused by Calverton and Hicks—seemed to Matthiessen blunt instruments with which to accomplish deep understanding of the pronounced "religious idealism" of American literature and culture.

The question before us is whether the intervention of the Cold War has made it impossible for us to apprehend such an interrogation of Marxist assumptions as anything but the creep of American exceptionalism, the eradication of which has arguably been American studies' raison d'être for the last twenty-five years. Despite his own Marxist commitments, Michael Denning, in his work on what he calls the "cultural front," takes us some way in this direction (*Cultural Front*). He makes clear—as the brief description of Matthiessen above should attest—that American studies originated within a Marxian frame rather than in constitutive opposition to it. Although he won't go as far as someone like Frank Lentricchia, who dares to call Kenneth Burke a Western Marxist (Denning, "Special American Conditions" 359), Denning is willing to consider American humanist intellectuals like Matthiessen alongside Raymond Williams and the Birmingham school of cultural studies as confronted by the same Marxian problematic, heightened by the Stalinist vulgarization of Marxism: how to subtilize Marx and Engels's simplistic base-superstructure model and dangerously thin conception of ideology as false consciousness? That is, how to achieve a more richly dialectical sense of the relation of the ideal and material realms? But Denning ultimately pulls up from this comparison on the basis of what he takes to be American studies' wrongheaded question in the face of vulgar Marxism: instead of asking, "What is culture?," as British cultural studies properly did, American studies asked, "What is American?" (360; cf. Giles). Is it possible to consider this substitution for or, rather, alternative riposte to vulgar Marxism as doing something other than inevitably sliding into spurious American exceptionalism (or inescapably constituting it)? Is it possible to recover this question from then and for now as an intellectually sincere and cogent problematization of Marxian assumptions that precedes and exceeds the polemical exigencies of Cold War discourse? Put another way, is there a context in which "What is American?" might prove a respectable and productive question to put to the Marxian metanarrative?

Current debates about the secular may provide that context. When we put the question "What is American" in the mouth of the Matthiessen I've described, it becomes clear that what elicits the question is not Marxism's conception of class struggle or its prescription of revolution—the familiar political ground on which Americanism and Marxism have been opposed—but its secularist bias, which, by Matthiessen's lights, renders it insensitive to the central "strain of affirmation of the ideal" in American literature and culture. Matthiessen's turn from the Marxism toward which he otherwise seemed so disposed on the basis of its secularist bias might be seized as an opportunity not merely to further discredit facile secularization narratives that are in fact exercises in secularist wish fulfillment but also to provide a non-Eurocentric account of what Charles Taylor has called "a secular age," a task I want to consider as something like a forgotten birthright of American studies.

Or perhaps a birthright that was sold. One way to narrate the history of American studies is to say that it initially engaged in a surface rather than symptomatic reading of the "main development of religious idealism

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from Edwards through the transcendental movement," to the extent that the field entered into something like a mimetic relation to its object. "The strain of the affirmation of the ideal" in the primary sources elicited a correspondent preoccupation with the awesome power of ideas to shape material relations. More and less generous interpretations of this surface-reading approach can be offered. One could emphasize practical and strategic factors at work: a host of new material—American literature and culture—had been nominated for serious academic study, and a basic project of critical description and classification—surface reading—was necessary. What was this material and what were its basic contours and content? Exemplary here would be Perry Miller as David Holland has recently described him—an "avowed atheist" who "let God play a starring role" in the lives of the Puritan subjects he studied because those were the terms in which his subjects made sense of their lives (218). Or one could read the inclination to surface reading symptomatically as damning evidence of the ideological operations of an American exceptionalism that perfectly counterpoised Marxism's symptomatic reading practice. We thus would have—all too serendipitously—Leo Marxism versus Karl Marxism. For the sake of the argument, I want to fend off the second interpretation, triumphant in the hands of the New Americanists, who have capitalized on their post–Cold War vantage point to eclipse their predecessors (Pease). I want to suggest that American studies, for all its problems once it was coopted by Cold War politics, may have been on to something that has largely been displaced by what Johannes Voelz has keenly demonstrated to be the New Americanists' somewhat opportunistic and indiscriminate absorption of continental philosophy during the heyday of "theory" (19–61). Let me make clear that I am not restaging the agon of "good" homegrown radicalism and "bad" imported radicalism. The New Americanists did not err by importing a Marxian problematic for the study of America; they perhaps erred by not appreciating the extent to which American studies had always been operating in a Marxian problematic. They traded an admittedly cooptable but potentially productive philosophical-methodological openness to the empirical reality of an American religiosity that bumped up against the limits of Marxist analysis for a more hermetic immersion in the given terms of a European (post-)Marxism revivified by 1968.

What if we were experimentally to continue to think with rather than dogmatically against early American studies' surface reading of American "religious idealism"? Before offering my own version of what that thinking with might yield, I must pay homage to one possible culmination of such a thinking with—perhaps the most unconscionable casualty of the New Americanist eclipse, the extraordinary work of Sacvan Bercovitch. Much more than Matthiessen, Bercovitch was a Marxist whose encounter with American literature and culture caused him to reconsider and reinvent his analytic premises. In his intellectual-autobiographical prefaces to *Rites of Assent* and the 2012 anniversary edition of *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch constructs himself as the beneficiary—rather than victim—of what he delineates as the "humanistic" orientation of early American studies, which "taught by example, in practice, that rhetoric is not a surface coating, 'mere metaphor,' upon the deep structures of the real. It is substantially, fundamentally, what the real is, even (or especially) when the rhetoric serves to repress and deny" (*Rites* 12; cf. Decker). The problem—which I don't want to gloss over—with American studies' "extraordinary capacity to analyze intricacies of thought, emotion, and imagination" was that it also seemed "bound up with an extraordinary unwillingness to extend analysis beyond the intricacies themselves. . . . The analytic tools of American Studies consisted

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of the same materials, the same patterns of thought and language, which Americanists had set out to investigate. This was empathic history with a vengeance" (10). But Bercovitch characterizes his overcoming of this weakness as generously dialectical rather than flatly oppositional. What early American studies simultaneously symptomatizes and provides a crucial set of tools to analyze is "ideology in a new key, requiring a blend" of analytic approaches: "cognitive," associated with the historical-materialist fleshing out of context—that is, symptomatic reading—and "appreciative," associated with "aesthetic criticism designed to reveal the richness, the complexity, and the (unfathomable) depths of the 'primary text' in its own 'organic' terms," or surface reading. In multiple senses, early American studies thus equips Bercovitch to comprehend "the world of America . . . in its fantastic textuality," to observe how "America" structurally confines America (13). Here is Bercovitch's fundamental insight regarding the bad feedback loop of "the American ideology," which insistently translates all radical dissent into Americanist terms, a cycle he sees perpetuated by the New Americanist radicals that effectively elided his immanent attempt to "understand the system, not transform it" (*American Jeremiad* xxiii–xxxiii; see also Traister 13–14).

Bercovitch furnishes another instance of how the study of American literature and culture provokes an idealist reflex, but in his case—reared in Montreal in a "Yiddishist left-wing . . . outpost barricaded from the threat of assimilation by radical politics and belles lettres, an immigrant enclave locked into a Romantic-Marxist utopianism long after its disillusionment with Stalin"—this reflex cannot readily be chalked up to interpellation by nationalism or simplistically referred to Cold War realpolitik (*Rites* 2). Bercovitch is a crucial figure in the genealogy of American studies in part because he represents the possibility of disentangling the idealism of American literature and culture and Americanist criticism from spurious American exceptionalism. Bercovitch's idealist skewing can instead be seen to be in the service of something like American exemplarism. America becomes "the example par excellence of collective fantasy" (6). America constitutes an extreme and therefore sharply illustrative case of how ideology works. One suspects a pointed pun when Bercovitch in his latest work describes the United States as "bound together by the *exceptionally* resilient boundaries of a certain modern ideology," since the rhetorical context indicates that "exceptionally" here is used in its loose, colloquial sense, to mean "especially" (*American Jeremiad* xxiii; my emphasis).

In Bercovitch's work the conception of America as an exception to a Marxist metanarrative is usefully transformed into a conception of America as an example of the persistence of the ideal as a category of experience and analysis. America thus comes to exemplify a historical process that runs against Marxism's materialist-secularist teleology—it seems people's lives continue to be mediated, not only destructively but constructively, by a thick layer of ideas, not coincidentally ones that are saturated with religious content and symbolism. To continue to think with Bercovitch's experimental thinking with early American studies, I want to suggest that this conception of American exemplarism might be turned toward a new history of "the secular." In his recent critique of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, José Casanova drops the following bombshell:

> What Taylor calls the nova and supernova effects . . . have always been operative in the United States, but only to multiply to the *n*th degree the myriad options of belief rather than those of unbelief. One could turn the European theories of American exceptionalism upside-down and view the historical process of secularization of Latin

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> Christendom not as the general rule but rather as the one truly exceptional process, unlikely to be produced anywhere else in the world with the same sequential arrangement and the corresponding stadial consciousness. (273)

America's "religious idealism" thus might be seen not as an exception to a rule of secularization; rather, the secularist Europe prophesied and actively pursued by Marxism is an exception to the rule of some other historical process that America exemplifies.

What, then, is this historical process, and in what way does America exemplify it? Here we might enlist another massive wrangle with the question of secularization, Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Perhaps more forgivably than Taylor's 2007 book, Blumenberg's 1966 tome exhibits the same myopic Eurocentrism. But Blumenberg furnishes a point that proves crucial to Casanova's critique. Blumenberg suggests that the process called "secularization"—a Christian term of art, after all—begins and may, in some sense, end in the Christian epoch. In Blumenberg's account, Gnosticism's radical eschatological division "between the sphere of salvation and the created world"—between an unimaginably transcendent elsewhere and a wicked god's bastardized production destined for imminent destruction—effectively created "the world" as the space in which one desperately waits, and waits, for a transcendence that doesn't arrive, what Blumenberg calls "secularization *by* eschatology" (37–51). Because, Blumenberg reasons, "what the term 'world' signifies itself *originated* in that process of 'reoccupying' the position of acute expectation of the end . . . , the possibility of talk of secularization is conditioned by the process that established 'worldliness' in the first place. There was no 'worldliness' before there was the opposite of 'unworldliness'" (47). Casanova echoes this point when he suggests that "the religious/secular dichotomy is *a particular medieval Christian version* of the more general axial dichotomous classification of transcendent and immanent orders of reality" (275; my emphasis).

But Blumenberg's Eurocentrism prevents him from applying his own historicizing logic of reoccupation as rigorously as he could. Having established that "'the world' is not a constant whose reliability guarantees that in the historical process an original constitutive substance must come back to light, undisguised, as soon as the super-imposed elements of theological deviation and specificity are cleared away," Blumenberg proceeds to treat the plane of immanence bequeathed to modern thought by medieval Christianity as though it were indeed the "real" world, a stage for "natural and rational self-assertion" (8, 178; see also Gillespie 12). What is crucially—shockingly—missing from Blumenberg's account of modernity is 1492. That year signals the moment the new world brought into being by the European discovery of the "New World"—a planetary space in which radical pluralities were yoked into a unity of proximity and relation—might be said to have succeeded, or reoccupied the position of, medieval Christianity's transcendence-haunted world. The result was the identification of Latin Christendom with "the sphere of salvation" and the many non-Christian cultures being incorporated into the new globe with the botched job of the "created world." This is "the world" in which we now live.

If we situate ourselves at the cosmic rupture of 1492, we can better answer the question Blumenberg put to his interlocutors, who were keen to delegitimize modernity by demonstrating its derivativeness: how, granting that "secularization is already a foregone conclusion with that early 'historicization of eschatology' between St. Paul and St. John," could Christianity "be 'secularized' yet again" in the modern age? How, in other words, might modern thought be something other than a *mere* "secularization"—that is to say,

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just a recycling of medieval Christian theology (40)? As I've suggested, Blumenberg's legitimization of modernity ultimately depends on a secularist metaphysics that can't help but revive an Enlightenment triumphalism that accords a special finality to modernity. Hence, in the end, his answer to those who see modern thought as the warmed-over same is that modernity might in fact hold the promise of a new substance. What I instead am proposing is a more strictly Blumenbergian solution: a modern age dated to 1492 can be readily understood as a reoccupation of the ontologically dualistic world of medieval Christianity by the internally riven monistic world of globality, in which the pseudo-ontological dualisms of race predominate. In this scheme the modern age is legitimized as something other than what went before, because it marks a discrete, further immanentization that might be distinguished from secularization as *globalization*. Given that this globalization involved the incorporation of vibrant polytheistic cultures of Amerindia, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, cultures perfectly capable of comprehending a "religious" form of immanence that was neither secularist-atheist nor a (quasi-)Christian transcendence in immanence, it should be no surprise that "myriad options of belief" have proliferated everywhere but in Europe. If we abandon the Eurocentric frame, the question of the persistence and propagation of religiosity well past the expiration date given it by the Enlightenment perhaps doesn't have to be so agonizingly paradoxical: how can a presumptive condition of secularity produce such religiosity? I do not discount this approach to the problem, which has produced marvelously rich work like Blumenberg's and Taylor's on the shoulders of which I stand. But I ask if it seems too conveniently nominalist a solution simply to assert that "the world" in which we happen to live is better understood as the outcome of a process of globalization—flamboyantly signaled by the emergence of a literal new world shattering cosmologies all around—that is at least partly distinct from and chronologically subsequent to a process called secularization.[2] The fundamental difference between these two epochal processes is perhaps registered by the sixteenth-century Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara's famous pronouncement: "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies" (qtd. in Elliott 10).

American studies is particularly well poised to investigate globalization as a political-theological phenomenon in its own right, by virtue of the simple fact that the discovery—or invention—of America inaugurated that process. America is here exemplary not in any moral-normative sense but simply in the sense of having been central to the initiation of a new historical pattern—think of Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein's pronouncement that "the creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas, was the constitutive act of the world-system" (549) or Benedict Anderson's tracing of the phenomenon of nationalism to the "creole pioneers" of the Americas (47–65). Another virtue of this approach is that it can be seen as answering to and enriched by the New Americanist intervention toward which I have been somewhat critical throughout but that I happily enfold into the field's dialectical becoming. Defining a task of American studies as the uncovering of the "concept of Americanity" at the basis of global modernity is facilitated by and can further facilitate two major, related thrusts of the New Americanist regime—a hermeneutically suspicious interrogation of what Winfried Fluck calls "the cultural sources of American [i.e., United States] power" and a critical resituation of "America" in hemispheric, transnational, and global contexts (30). For one thing, this scheme might enable us to ask how American exemplarism in a moral-normative sense might be related to American exemplarism in the global-

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historical sense described above. Paradoxically, might any sway "America" has derive not from its projected transcendence of temporality—its vaunted "newness"—but from its historical priority, its paradigmatic oldness so far as global modernity is concerned? For another, we might recognize that "America" in this scheme refers us to 1492 rather than to 1607 or 1776 and therefore is intrinsically hemispherist, Atlanticist-cum-globalist in its approach. And, indeed, my proposal is deeply indebted to Latin American thinkers and scholars like Enrique Dussel and Edmundo O'Gorman who have grasped much more acutely than their North American counterparts the world-historical significance of Columbus's voyage. Although uncovering the concept of Americanity at the basis of global modernity may lead to a very different place, it would be impossible to envision and undertake this task without crediting Matthiessen's studied resistance of Marxism on historical rather than political grounds—in view of the empirically valid observation of America's effervescent "religious idealism." To the extent that we take the stated task to be a worthy one, the radical idealism of American studies—from Matthiessen to Bercovitch—is valorized as something other than a politically suspect knee-jerk aversion to Marxian radicalism. That radical idealism, maintained against a secularist-materialist teleology, can now be seen to point the way to what might be a truly radical form of "transnational American studies"—something like a historical ontology in which we can observe the succession of "worlds," in particular the advent in 1492 of the globalized rather than secularized "world" we now inhabit. At the risk of inviting entirely warranted eye rolls, I slap yet another adjective in front of "American studies" and speak of something that might, for the fun of the rhetorical game at least, be called "cosmic American studies."

Notes

My special thanks go to the graduate students in my spring 2013 seminar, Transnational American Studies, for helping me crystallize these ideas—Linda Liu, Grant Shreve, and Doug Tye. No doubt the essay would be that much clearer if I'd had a few more weeks around the seminar table with them.

1. Matthiessen, *Responsibilities* 10, 11. I am persuaded by those accounts of Matthiessen that insist on his chronological priority to and ideological distinctiveness from Cold War liberalism—e.g., William Cain's subtle tracking of Matthiessen's idiosyncratic but undeniable socialism (esp. 45–46, 91–131; see also Buhle 214–15 and Sweezy) and Jonathan Arac's characterization of second-generation, Cold War–era American studies as a nationalistic appropriation of Matthiessen's "Popular Front figure of 'America'" in a manner "contrary to his intentions" (167, 161). Matthiessen's homosexuality also needs mentioning here as a factor that specifies and, indeed, valorizes what might be called the queerness of his politics.

2. I am deeply sympathetic to those who, like Mahmood and like Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, critique the Eurocentrism of grand narratives of the secular, but the thesis that "the process by which Latin Christendom got to be secular was in large part the same as the process by which it got to be colonial" may not be radical enough (Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, Introd. 27). In the Blumenbergian extrapolation I've proposed, Latin Christendom's "getting colonial" constitutes an apotheosis—a reoccupation of the sacred, transcendent space of the Gnostic pleroma rather than the "secular," immanent "world" excruciatingly awaiting transcendence. A new development has occurred.

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