CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

1

CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

Introduction: What, then, is the American?

Every year, on March 22, Riverside, Iowa, celebrates an event that has not yet happened and never will. It is the place and date designated for the birth of Captain James Tiberius Kirk, Captain of the Star Ship Enterprise. America has so successfully colonized the future that it has mastered the art of prospective nostalgia. Its natural tense is the future perfect. It looks forward to a time when something will have happened. It is a place, too, where fact and fiction, myth and reality dance a curious gavotte. It is a society born out of its own imaginings.

There are those who believe they can remember alternative past lives. The science fiction writer Philip K. Dick claimed to remember a different present life. In his case it may have had something to do with amphetamines, but in fact we do inhabit different and parallel presents. The 1920s constituted the jazz age, except for those who tapped their feet to different rhythms. The 1960s were about drugs and rock and roll, except for the majority for whom they were not. Thoreau once wrote of his wriggling his toes in the mud of Walden Pond in search of the rock beneath. The search for a secure foundation is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. Nineteenth-century American writers dealt in symbols for a reason. Unlike the metaphor, the symbol suggested a field of meaning, an ambiguity which in the end perhaps could more truthfully capture a world in flux, desperate for clear definitions yet aware that in stasis lay a denial of, rather than a route to, meaning in a society wedded to the idea of possibility, always coming into being and never fixed.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* begins in a curious way. A late consumptive usher to a grammar school offers an etymology and a sub-sub librarian supplies a series of abstracts which together identify what is described as a "veritable gospel cetology," a seemingly comprehensive account of whales, their types, weight, size, reproductive habits. Detail after detail is offered as if thereby to reveal an undeniable truth. It is a mock taxonomy or, as Melville suggests, "a glancing bird's eye view." For what follows is a novel

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

with the ultimate in floating signifiers, the great white whale that is Moby Dick, a screen onto which the characters project their own meanings in a novel in which identity is problematic. Even the narrator coyly refuses to define who he might be, offering instead a name which identifies him with an ancestor of twelve tribes but a name which also means "outcast." "Call me Ishmael," he suggests, as if mocking the desire for a true self and this in a novel about the wish to pin down, harpoon a singular meaning.[1] Here is Melville's allegory for the similar desire to stabilize America, identify what it might be and thereby define its citizens.

James Fenimore Cooper, another chonicler of an emerging country, created a protagonist who at one moment was the prosaic Natty Bumppo, then Long Rife, Leatherstocking, Hawkeye. Only the British soldiers in those novels, which track back near to the beginning of the American experience, were manifestly who they seemed. The American was legion. At the same time Nathaniel Hawthorne was creating his own fable of an ambiguous identity in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the letter A, inscribed on the breast of Hester Prynne, offered as a definition by those intent to insist upon a singular meaning, is transformed by experience, this being the gift offered by a culture in which transformation is the essence. Call me Chillingworth, says her cold-hearted husband, implying that a name is no more than a convenience, as she suggests to her fearful lover that he could change his name and so liberate himself from his own past, liberation from the past being a national imperative.

At one moment America was to be self-evident fact; at another its virtue lay in its resolute refusal of definition. For Henry Steal Commager, writing in 1950, "Over a period of two and a half centuries, marked by such adventures as few other people had known, Americans had created an American character and formulated an American philosophy." However, "that character all but eludes description and that philosophy definition" even if "both were unmistakable."[2]

This was the existential space where existence preceded essence and yet essence was in a curious way assumed. No one knew what America would become and yet everyone assumed they knew it for what it was. America was a blank sheet on which her identity was yet to be inscribed. It was also a new Eden, undefined, yet one whose parameters were known because delineated in myth. It was simultaneously what it was and what it would become. It was the future and the past in the same moment.

To travel west was to travel back in time toward a primitive encounter with nature and to travel forward into a new land of possibility. The writers knew early that the essence of the country lay in a resistance to definition, hence their preference for symbols rather than metaphor. It was a kaleidoscope of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

shifting possibilities. At the same time the root meaning of the word "symbol" is "thrown together", so that there is the potential for this centripetal urge to terraform a country, improvise it into being, and improvisation has always been an American virtue and necessity. The ache to be clear about national identity and destiny was clear in encomiums to what did not in truth yet exist but along with this went a perception that this was a culture endlessly wedded to becoming, that being its special gift to the world, charged with a kinetic energy you could feel from across the oceans of the world but which could never discharge completely or it would lose its force.

In 2004, Bruce Springsteen, in explaining his reluctant decision to involve himself in that year's presidential election, remarked that in the aftermath of 9/11 "I felt the country's unity." He could not, though, "remember anything quite like it." Nor did the feeling last. The election, he suggested, was essentially about "who we are, what we stand for," though what that "who" and "what" might be was clearly no more evident to him than to those who had sung America a century and a half before, a Walt Whitman, say, who celebrated heterogeneity in what was offered as a national epic in which the narrative voice was an I that contained multitudes. "Why is it," Springsteen asked,

> that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens? Why do we continue to find it so difficult to see beyond the veil of race? How do we conduct ourselves during difficult times without killing the things we hold dear? Why does the fulfilment of our promise as a people always seem to be just within grasp yet for ever out of reach?

He may have been "Born in the USA" but the question remained, what is this thing, the USA?[3] That question has echoed down the corridors of American consciousness.

At 8.46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, a Boeing 767 American Airlines plane flying from Boston to Los Angeles, carrying eighty-one passengers and eleven crew, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. Seventeen minutes later, another 767, a United Airlines flight carrying fifty-six passengers and nine crew, also en route from Boston to Los Angeles, crashed into the South Tower. At 10.05 the South Tower collapsed, followed, twenty-three minutes later, by the North. In just one hour and forty-two minutes, 2,752 people died.

Those who had begun their day with a hurried kiss of farewell, thinking of no more than what they must do and their destinations, found this to be their last day on earth, never knowing why this should be so or that this

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

was, indeed, their fate. After the sudden shock of flame, smoke drifted across the water, papers blew through streets rimed with dust, words unwriting themselves in the artificial night. People stood, unbelieving and yet not altogether unprepared. Figures began to fall, dwarfed by the scale of the buildings, as men and women chose to take their own lives rather than have them taken by fire, until the towers themselves fell inwards and down as if consuming themselves. It was, as many remarked, like a dream or a movie and this is why a unique event seemed to stir a sense of déjà vu. For the fact is that the towers had fallen before.

They had fallen in movies, in *Armageddon* and *Independence Day*. The visual rhyme was so precise and disturbing as to prompt the question of whether the terrorists had been filmgoers before they were killers of men and women. New York was the site of apocalypse on film long before it was in fact. The Manhattan skyline, symbol of modernity, had always carried the promise and threat of the future. The city experience itself, with its raw energy and reckless violence, its opportunities and corruptions, had always been viewed ambiguously. And for those who wished not only to challenge America's power but modernity itself, what better way to bring the country low, using nothing more advanced than box cutters and America's technology turned against itself. In the luna dust which swathed the broken buildings and streets, cell phones rang their jaunty tunes, never to be answered. Cars in station car parks stood abandoned, accumulating fines never to be paid. Individuals came forward to recount final calls from the doomed aircraft, love declared in the face of human dereliction. The twenty-first century, it seemed, was to be recursive. In the course of a hundred and two minutes, something had ended.

The Twin Towers were no more casually chosen than perhaps was the date. September 11 was the anniversary of the British mandate in Palestine and of George Bush Senior's proclamation of a "New World Order," just as the Bali nightclub bombing and the attack on the USS *Cole* took place on the anniversary of the opening of the Camp David peace talks between Egypt and Israel. In Washington, the Pentagon came under attack while almost certainly the White House was another target. Under assault were symbols of America's economic, military, and political supremacy. Those who launched the assault, far from seeing America as the new paradigm, rejected the very idea of its global primacy and in particular the presence in the Middle East (and especially in Saudi Arabia) of military units, which they saw as bridgeheads into Arab territory, and the export of cultural values, which they saw as at odds with their own. There were few at the time, however, inclined to look for rational explanations of a seemingly irrational action. Indeed, the very attempt to do so seemed akin to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

believing that there could be a justification for the unthinkable. The response was less analytical than visceral.

America's primary response was bewilderment. What cause could be served by mass murder? Why would America, which saw itself as carrying the torch of freedom, as a model for the world, custodian of the future, be targeted in this way? Flags flew from every building, house, car, truck. Church services were held. New heroes were identified and celebrated. Money was raised. For a brief while the world offered sympathy and shared in the agony. But the question was, where was the enemy and how might it be brought low?

Americans were so many trauma victims. They had been injured but the full pain had yet to register. People wandered the streets, covered in grey dust, like living statues, survivors of Pompeii. Soon, trucks began to make their way through the streets, gathering up the rubble of broken lives along with the concrete and steel, the smashed computers, memories wiped, screens broken or blank. Yet behind this, often unspoken, because at such a moment some things may not be spoken, there were other questions, questions about national purpose and identity, the fate of the Great Experiment.

Many had expected the millennium to precipitate apocalypse, to mark the passing of the American Century. In the end the gestation of disaster lasted nearly a full nine months longer but when it came it went far further than the fear that computers would reset their internal clocks to 1900, though America's future has always tended to be seen in terms of its past, with references to a dream first dreamed centuries ago and to a frontier closed for more than a hundred years. Suddenly, the future seemed occluded, cataracted over with pain. America's most intelligent television drama, *The West Wing*, scrapped its season premiere. Its stars stepped out of character to solicit funds for those who had suffered before staging a fictional debate between White House staffers and a group of high school students on a visit whose first question is "why is everybody trying to kill us?" Its determinedly liberal scriptwriter tried his best to explain, warned against intolerance, but the effect, though worthy, was inert. Later, *24*, a taut adventure series, envisaged a group of Americans hiding behind supposed terrorists in order to provoke a Middle East war. The evidence is fraudulent. The war is stopped. Except that it was not. A real war was launched on Iraq before the series had finished shooting. Creators of fiction tried desperately to insist on complexity. Devisers of national policy settled for something altogether simpler.

Who are we, many asked, that others should seek our lives? What is this America that they believe they know well enough to wish its end? And such

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

questions had the force they did because they were questions which had been asked before.

Since this was a country that had long believed itself the trailblazer, the pathfinder, the pioneer of modernity, why were there those who not merely refused to follow the yellow brick road to paradise but instead chose death, their own no less than that of their victims, as a route to a paradise which owed nothing to freedom of speech and assembly, to liberal democracy or material prosperity? Beneath the confident recommitment to familiar principles, the announcement of a new Pax Americana, to be enforced by the military might of the world's only superpower, was a series of troubling questions, questions whose answers would have taken them back, if that were a direction Americans liked to go. What is America? Who are Americans? What is this culture they have forged? What is the future toward which they march? And what of those who march to a different drummer? This book is hardly designed to answer those questions but in looking back over a hundred or so years it does attempt to explore some aspects of a country and its culture which are a central fact of the modern experience.

Writing in 1782, just six years after the establishment of the new Republic, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked a question that has hardly lost its cogency with the centuries: "What, then, is the American, this new man?" He offered an answer. "He is an American," he explained,

> who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; they will finish the great circle.[4]

What he offered, however, was largely a process not an identity, a destiny rather than a description. His confidence in that destiny, though, was shared half a century later by another French observer.

Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville was entirely convinced that, "whatever they do, the Americans of the United States will turn into one of the greatest nations of the world . . . One day wealth, power, and glory cannot fail to be theirs." Admittedly, he was not right about everything. He insisted, for example, that lawyers formed "the only enlightened class not distrusted by the people."[5] For the most part, though, he was an excellent analyst and fair prophet. He predicted that by 1935, 100 years later, there

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

would be 100 million Americans living in 40 states and that one day the figure would reach 150 million sharing the same religion and language. In fact the twentieth century began with a population of 72,212,168, which rose by the year 2000 to 281,421,906 (the population not only growing in numbers but weight, gaining ten pounds each during the 1990s, causing airlines to use an additional 350 million gallons of fuel releasing an additional 3.8 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere), while in 1935 there were 48 states and a population of 127,250,272. He was not, then, so far off. Nor was he wrong about the religion and (until the late twentieth century) the language. For him, slavery aside, the restless and threatening power of the majority aside, the new country's insufferably high opinion of itself aside, the fact that the President seemed to place re-election higher in his priorities than public service aside, America was a good news story. At a time when its myths were still in the making, he was ready to acknowledge the substance behind those myths. America was, indeed, he insisted, about freedom and opportunity and he celebrated the new country.

What is a culture? It is, as the dictionary (*Chambers*) helpfully tells us, "the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action, the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group." All of which makes the idea of capturing it in a single volume a touch presumptuous. More simply, it is "a particular civilization at a particular period." It is also, though, in a more restricted sense, "the artistic and social pursuits, expression, and tastes valued by a society or class as in the arts, manners, dress, etc."

What is the modern? The same dictionary (*Chambers*) insists it is the historical period beginning with the Middle Ages, which would make Chaucer our contemporary and the Black Death headline news. More plausibly, it dates from those Enlightenment values which characterized eighteenth-century England and France and which made their way into American thought, indeed most conspicuously into the American Constitution. In that sense, the modern experience is coterminous with the American experience. Such values stressed the politics of liberty, on a personal and social level, and in America, certainly, religious tolerance (though scarcely in the original Puritan settlement) and a certain moral strenuousness, neither tolerance nor religion coming high on the list in revolutionary France. It is not hard to see how this gave birth to classic nineteenth-century liberalism, to a practical stress on the self-made man, on private charity, and, indeed, to an emphasis on capitalism, whose excesses would eventually be contained by a social ethic which was itself a product of the Enlightenment.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

Such a definition of the modern, however, would in effect call for a history of America and that is not what follows. For the purposes of this study, then, I have chosen to define the modern more narrowly, focusing on the twentieth century while taking both a broad and a narrow definition of culture. This, in other words, is an attempt to explore what once used to be called American civilization. It is an effort to understand America and its cultural products. It is not a book about modernism, though that was one expression of a self-conscious modernity, but about the modern, and for much of the twentieth century America was seen as the embodiment of that, so much so that for some the two became confused to the point that what was often described as Americanization was in truth modernity, whose wave first broke on the American shore. This is a study which moves us from a time when America was regarded as marginal to the political, economic, and artistic world to a moment, a few years into the twenty-first century, when it had become the only superpower, when its cultural products were ubiquitous and when it had invaded the consciousness of virtually everyone on the planet.

Quite the most contentious aspect of the title of this book, though, lies in that word "American," not simply because it seems to arrogate to a single country the name of a continent but because its very identity has always been the subject of debate and because to Janice Radway – the President-elect of the American Studies Association, speaking in 1998 – the word seemed to homogenize what was in effect a series of groups previously disempowered and ignored by such a seemingly singular designation. To Daniel Bell, in *The End of Ideology*, America is a cluster of meanings and to ask what its secret might be "is to pose a metaphysical question whose purpose is either ideological or mythopoeic." The emergence in the postwar world of something called American studies was, to his mind, simply an attempt to prove to the rest of the world "that America has a culture too,"[6] itself an observation that betokens the self-doubt which he seems to be attacking.

In fact, American studies had its roots before the war and displayed, at least originally, a confident conviction that America could be located through a study of its history, literature, and values even if its originators, in the late 1930s, saw a contradiction between capitalism and the principles on which the country had been founded. In other words, here was an academic movement which still believed that the culture could be explained to itself but whose members were simultaneously in contention with its then current direction. This was how communism could be seen as twentieth-century Americanism, the slogan which a young Leo Marx (author of *The Machine in the Garden*, 1964, and later to be Chair of the American Studies

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

Association) saw on the huge banner above a meeting of the Communist Party USA in the Boston Garden, in 1939, a meeting addressed by Earl Browder, Chairman of the Party. And Marx was a regular attender of Party meetings just as was a historian, Daniel Boorstin, later to become the Librarian of Congress. Others, such as Henry Nash Smith (*Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol*, 1950) and Daniel Aaron (*Writers on the Left*, 1974), were also of the Left. F. O. Matthiessen (*American Renaissance*, 1941) was a socialist. Their confidence in ideology would falter but not their belief in the academic project to which they were wedded. They believed there was a definable America to be addressed. By 1998, however, things had changed. Janice Radway proposed that the word "American" should be struck from the American Studies Association's title because it implied an homogeneity that could no longer be sustained. Her America had dissolved into subgroups which had no desire to be thought of as such. America had been a kind of surrogate mother and the time had come to acknowledge that the offspring had no necessary organic connection but were, like Gatsby, their own Platonic creations.

It is not, it should be said, how most outsiders saw America. From a distance it was not difference which first struck observers. Just as in 1969 the planet had been viewed for the first time from space, whole and entire, so from elsewhere America seemed entirely defined and definable, and sometimes threateningly so.

America is a country built on contradictions. Imperial in origin, it has remained such ever since, yet seldom if ever confesses as much. It is a secular state suffused with religion, a puritan culture in love with pornography (all expensive hotels will have a Gideon Bible – 112 of which were placed in them every minute in 2004) and pornographic movies, the one free, the other being discretely labeled on hotel checks so as to keep a guilty secret. Fifty percent of hotel guests pay for pornographic films while, in 2004, Godfrey Hodgson tells us, 11,000 "adult films" were released. America gave the world *Playboy* magazine, its first "Playmate" featuring Marilyn Monroe. America pioneered the topless and bottomless bar (there is even a plaque celebrating the latter) even as, if statistics mean anything, those watching in-house porn, purchasing "adult magazines" and, increasingly, visiting pornographic websites, dutifully go to church on a Sunday, no doubt to repent of such actions. Indeed, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*'s "Faith and Values" section (itself evidence of the religious orientation of its readers) brought news of "The Christian Porn Site" (www.xxxChurch.com) which offered advice to Christians trying to resist pornography. It marketed an online programme called "30 days to purity" and software that could notify a partner whenever a porn site has been visited.[7] It was, seemingly, an

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84132-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture
Edited by Christopher Bigsby
Excerpt
More information

uphill task. In 2004 one software management company had 16 million adult web pages on its database, raising the question of what the word "adult" might mean.

America celebrates the individual yet its citizens are, as Sinclair Lewis observed, always joining clubs, cults, goodfellow societies, teams (though Godfrey Hodgson notes that in the last decade of the twentieth century this process would seemingly decline, marking a withdrawal from communalism) while, as de Toqueville noted, there is a constant risk of a tyranny of the majority ("If ever freedom is lost in America, blame will have to be laid at the door of the omnipotence of the majority.")[8] The standardization against which Lewis had warned in *Babbitt* remains as evident in the twenty-first century in everything from food and coffee through hotels and stores to clothes and television programmes. The salesman with prostate problems who visits the lavatory (never called such of course) in the middle of the night in a Holiday Inn need never open his eyes. The bathroom and the toilet will always be reliably in the same place.

In its films America is drawn to apocalypse provided it is followed by redemption. It weds violence to sentimentality, invincibility to vulnerability. America celebrates the family while for every two marriages there is one divorce. Ronald Reagan reaffirmed the iconic status of the family, despite his own dysfunctional one. America is presented as a City on the Hill, a model for good practice (with First Amendment rights and due process) while abandoning such good practice when under pressure (the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II; the witchhunts of the 1950s; the Patriot Act of the twenty-first century). It is a country with its eyes set on the future but whose utopia is Eden, to be located in a mythic past. All men, it declares, are created equal, even as the gap between the rich and the poor or, indeed, the middle class, grows ever wider (Godfrey Hodgson points out that between 1989 and 1997 the share of wealth owned by the top 1 percent of American households grew from 37.4 percent to 39.1 percent while the total share in the national wealth of the middle fifth of American families fell from 4.8 percent to 4.4 percent).[9] According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2003, 35.9 million Americans (roughly the equivalent of the population of California) were living below the poverty line, representing 12.5 percent of the population, up from 11.3 percent in 2000. Its national dream speaks of the move from poverty to wealth yet as Hodgson has pointed out, in 1994 the United States had the highest poverty rate of sixteen developed countries and the second lowest rate of escape from poverty.[10]

It has the best and the worst health care in the world, depending on income and location, though in 1999 the infant mortality rate was higher

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org