Speaking of Diversity
Gleason, Philip

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Gleason, Philip.
Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68469

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2412205
The Study of American Culture

Given the range of intellectual and cultural effects described in the previous essay, one would naturally expect to find that World War II had some influence on the academic study of American culture, and especially on the newly emerging discipline of American studies, which took the national culture as its special province. What is surprising in this connection is not the existence of such influence but that no one called attention to it until the war had been over for almost forty years.

It is true, of course, that very little systematic study has been devoted to the evolution of American studies, so we are pretty much in the dark about all aspects of its history. But this is a discipline whose founders lived through the war as adults. These people and their first-generation students dominated the field at least into the 1970s. And yet the published record establishes quite clearly that World War II simply does not figure in the collective memory of Americanists as a formative moment in the development of their discipline. (I am speaking of the United States; as is pointed out in the essay, the development of American studies abroad was quite clearly a by-product of the war).

The reason for this puzzling omission, I suspect, is that the cultural tasks reinforced by the war—tasks such as articulating the nation’s values, reappropriating its spiritual heritage, and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the American character—seemed so intrinsic to the new discipline, so entwined in its basic fabric, that it never occurred to academic Americanists that an “external” factor such as the war could have had anything to do with their interest in these matters. That is, of course, speculative. But the evidence presented in this essay shows that the war set off a massive ideological reawakening that was closely related to key themes in American studies; in addition, wartime developments in national character studies fed directly into one of the leading preoccupations of postwar Americanists, understanding the American character or (as Erik Erikson called it) American identity.

Although my own acquaintance with American studies as a field goes
back to the mid fifties, a quarter-century passed before I awoke to the possibility that World War II had influenced its development. The connection first struck me when I was working on the essay for the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, but it is not developed there; the article reprinted here was written for the 1984 bibliographical issue of the American Quarterly, which dealt with war and American culture.

Despite the fact that World War II immediately preceded the great burgeoning of academic programs in American studies, our conventional understanding of the rise of the movement ignores the war and, by doing so, denies it any role in the development of American studies. Very little research has been devoted to the subject, but what might be called the "folk history" of American studies runs like this: The movement had its beginnings in the 1920s with scattered efforts among professors of literature and history to develop an integrated approach to the study of the national culture; it took on more formal shape in the 1930s with establishment of the first degree programs in American civilization at Harvard, Yale, and Pennsylvania; and it expanded rapidly in the next decade by a natural process of growth, the launching of American Quarterly (1949) and the founding of the American Studies Association (1951) being the culminating marks of its maturation. My purpose here is not to dispute the chronology of this "folk history" but to call attention to, and in a small way to compensate for, its failure to accord any positive importance to World War II as a factor in the development of American studies.1

Considering the vast scale and significance of World War II as an episode in the national experience, there is a prima facie case for assuming that it had some impact on academic efforts to understand and interpret American life and culture. In what follows, I will specify the case in three areas: 1) the growth of American studies abroad; 2) the wartime revival of the democratic ideology and its relation to the "cultural" understanding of American identity; and 3) the impetus given by the war to national character studies, which interacted with the ideological revival to stimulate great interest in the problem of defining the American character. In developing the second and third points I make no claim that the war alone was responsible for subsequent developments in American studies. All I hope to establish is that it was an important factor in the evolution of American studies as an academic movement and that its influence warrants further study.

With respect to the expansion of American studies abroad, the connection with the war is patent. The United States emerged from the
conflict in 1945 as one of two global superpowers and the bastion of the free world. Sigmund Skard underlines the significance of this fact in tracing the development of American studies in Europe. Besides the political, economic, and military factors that made America much more important to Europeans than it had been before, Skard adds that they felt the need for a deeper understanding of "the common cultural foundations of the West, including the United States." Robert E. Spiller, one of the founders of the movement, also calls attention to the impact of the war on the growth of American studies in Europe.²

Concerning the second point, my contention is that World War II powerfully reinforced existing tendencies toward cultural nationalism, gave great prominence to the ideological dimension of American identity (that is, to the ideas and values for which the nation stands), and forged a link between the democratic ideology and the idea of culture that became central to the American studies approach.

Evidence of growing self-consciousness about the distinctiveness of American culture was discernible in the twenties and gained ground rapidly in the next decade. By 1930 students of American literature were, according to Spiller, "virtually committed to the gigantic task of restudying the American past from the point of view of a literary history which was nationalistic without being chauvinistic and which attempted to discover the relationship between the literature actually produced in America and its immediate sources in cultural evolution."³ In the same period, Frederick Jackson Turner's distinctively American frontier thesis, Vernon L. Parrington's Jeffersonianism, and Charles A. Beard's democratic progressivism were in the ascendancy among historians, while the History of American Life series, which began to appear in 1927 under the general editorship of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., and Dixon Ryan Fox, betokened a new determination to include the whole of the national culture in the historian's purview. Indeed, the desire to capture and record the day-to-day experiences of the American people was widely shared by artists, scholars, and literate Americans, as Alfred Kazin noted long ago in his book, On Native Grounds (1942). In the concluding chapter, "America! America!" Kazin interpreted the contemporary interest in regionalism, the collection of folklore, and the preparation of film documentaries as manifestations of a cultural nationalism that was not "blind and parochial," but an "experience in national self-discovery." Warren Susman has called attention to Kazin's judgment and develops many of the same points in a highly suggestive essay, "The Thirties." He emphasizes the importance assumed by the anthropological concept of culture in those years, points out that its acceptance coincided with
the popularization of expressions such as *American way of life* and *American dream*, and argues that the literary nationalism of the decade reflected a "complex effort to seek and to define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding."

These tendencies were buttressed and given a sharp ideological focus by the mounting threat of Nazi power. Kazin hinted at this development by linking the evidence of cultural nationalism with the international crisis. The emergence of the United States as "the repository of Western culture in the world overrun by Fascism," he declared, lent urgency to the effort "to recover America as an idea." In fact, by 1939 a mighty democratic revival was under way which continued into the wartime years and shaped the outlook of a whole generation. A few recent scholarly works have touched on one aspect or another of the democratic revival of World War II, but it has yet to be surveyed in its entirety.6

Observers at the time were aware that a requickening of the democratic spirit was taking place. "The American people are talking democracy over again," was the way Benson Y. Landis put it in introducing a lengthy reading list on the subject of democracy that was published by the American Library Association in January 1940. This particular listing included some 290 titles, many of which were annotated, arranged under twenty-nine headings. It was not the only such guide to "books for democracy" to be published in the wartime era. Yet listings of this sort could not keep pace with the flood of new publications.7 The *Book Review Digest's* cumulative index for the years 1937–1941 lists 132 titles under the heading "Democracy," and the entries in the *Reader's Guide* likewise testify to a rising wave of magazine articles on democracy that crested just about the time that the United States entered the war.8

Anthologies on democracy, such as Irwin Edman and Herbert W. Schneider's *Fountainheads of Freedom* (1941), and Norman Cousins's *A Treasury of Democracy* (1942), were also published in these years.9 Another collection, Bernard Smith's *Democratic Spirit* (1941), brought together American writings, mostly selections from classic authors such as Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman. In his introduction, however, Smith emphasized the relevance of democratic principles in the contemporary crisis, and he included a selection from Lewis Mumford's *Faith for Living* (1940), a militantly anti-fascist work controversial because of the author's stringent critique of prevailing intellectual trends that had sapped America's spiritual fiber.10 Democracy was, of course, a recurrent theme in *American Issues* (1941), the famous anthology edited by Willard Thorp, Merle Curti, and Carlos Baker. The final selection in the volume devoted to "The Social Record," a speech by the progressive educator, George S.
Counts, spoke directly to the contemporary crisis. This address, which was given only a few weeks after the collapse of France, reveals vividly how the stunning onslaught of Nazi panzers convinced many American observers that civilization itself was imperiled and galvanized them to a passionate affirmation of democratic principles.\textsuperscript{11}

The same reaction prompted the formation of ad hoc groups dedicated to defining, defending, and promoting democracy. Among the earliest and most important with respect to intellectual substance was the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life. Its organizers began their work in the fall of 1939, enrolled seventy-nine leading scholars as founding members in June, 1940, and held their first symposium three months later. These gatherings, the printed proceedings of which often ran to well over five hundred pages, were held annually through the war years and for over a decade thereafter.\textsuperscript{12} A breakaway group, dissatisfied with the strongly religious orientation of the original conference, organized itself as a rival Conference on the Scientific Spirit and Democratic Faith and began meeting in 1943.\textsuperscript{13} In the meantime, two other groups had appeared on the scene. The Council for Democracy, headed by the respected news commentator, Raymond Gram Swing, mobilized some eighty well-known scholars and writers to instill in the American people the conviction that democracy was "a real, dynamic burning creed worth fighting for."\textsuperscript{14} A few months after the Council for Democracy was formed, another group calling itself the Committee of Fifteen published a manifesto entitled \textit{The City of Man: A Declaration on World Democracy} (1941), which exhorted Americans—in language that would have been dismissed as bombastic under other circumstances—to meet their responsibilities to civilization.\textsuperscript{15}

Besides these newly formed groups, the educational establishment threw itself into the campaign to promote democracy. The Progressive Education Association had already taken up the cause of "Education for Democracy," and in the critical summer months of 1940 special statements on that theme were issued by the American Council on Education, the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association, and the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, the Foreign Language Information Service, an organization long active in the field of ethnic affairs, transformed itself into the Common Council for American Unity and began to publish \textit{Common Ground} in an effort to reinforce national unity by rallying America's diverse and often hostile ethnic groups around the universal principles of democracy.\textsuperscript{17}
People occasionally wearied of hearing about democracy—in 1941 Justice William O. Douglas reported hearing an audience cheer the boast of a speaker that he had not used the word in his talk—but on the whole the people responded positively to the message of democratic patriotism. One indication was the enthusiasm that greeted the Ballad for Americans, a rousing cantata by John Latouche and Earl Robinson. This musical review of the national heritage included generous mention of minority group representatives and “wave[d] the flag for tolerance,” as Newsweek put it. Paul Robeson introduced Ballad for Americans in a November 1939 radio broadcast and in doing so set off a frenzy of applause in the studio audience that lasted twenty minutes after the broadcast went off the air. MGM snapped it up for a movie; high school choruses performed it across the country; and Horace Kallen was still recommending it warmly to teachers of English in 1946.

The democratic revival was fully in line with national policy as enunciated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who spoke of making the United States “the arsenal of democracy,” proclaimed the “four freedoms” in his annual message to Congress in January 1941, and devoted his third inaugural address to a meditative reflection on the democratic faith that was challenged by the international threat as it had earlier been challenged on the domestic front by the depression. The first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, elaborated her own views in a book called The Moral Basis of Democracy (1940).

An alphabetically arranged sampling will give some indication of the range and stature of the authors who wrote on democracy and the world crisis during this period: Herbert Agar, A Time for Greatness (1942); Jacques Barzun, Of Human Freedom (1939); Carl Becker, Modern Democracy (1940), and New Liberties for Old (1940); Edward L. Bernays, Speak Up for Democracy (1940); James B. Conant, Our Fighting Faith (1942); George S. Counts, The Prospects of American Democracy (1938); Carl J. Friedrich, The New Belief in the Common Man (1942); Sidney Hook, Reason, Social Myths and Democracy (1940); William T. Hutchinson, ed., Democracy and National Unity (1942); Max Lerner, It’s Later Than You Think: The Need for a Militant Democracy (1938); Robert M. MacIver, Leviathan and the People (1939); Archibald MacLeish, The Irresponsibles (1940), A Time to Speak (1940), and The American Cause (1941); Thomas Mann, The Coming Victory of Democracy (1938); Charles E. Merriam, The New Democracy and the New Despotism (1939), What Is Democracy? (1941), and On the Agenda of Democracy (1941); Lewis Mumford, Men Must Act (1939), and Faith for Living (1940); Jerome Nathanson, Forerunners of Freedom (1941); Wilfrid Parsons,
Which Way, Democracy? (1939); Ralph Barton Perry, Shall Not Perish From the Earth (1940), and On All Fronts (1942); T. V. Smith, The Democratic Tradition in America (1941), and Discipline for Democracy (1942); Ordway Tead, New Adventures in Democracy (1939); M. L. Wilson, Democracy Has Roots (1939); and Carl Wittke, ed., Democracy Is Different (1941).

Besides these topical treatments, a number of works that formed the basic reading for American studies were published at this time and may be related to the democratic revival. Ralph H. Gabriel's Course of American Democratic Thought (1940), for example, appeared in the midst of the revival and contributed to it. Democracy was a recurrent theme in Merle Curti's Growth of American Thought (1943), the first edition of which concluded with the question that cut through all others—would democracy survive the challenge of totalitarianism and war? A second edition of Carl Becker's already classic Declaration of Independence (1922) was issued in 1942 with prefatory remarks by the author on its pertinence to the times. Perry Miller's New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (1939) added new depth to the understanding of American origins; and Ralph Barton Perry's Puritanism and Democracy (1944) highlighted the connection between the Puritan heritage and the national ideology. Other important historical works reaffirmed American principles at least by implication: Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, The American Spirit (1942); Arthur Ekirch, The Idea of Progress in America, 1815–1860 (1944); Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment (1944); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (1945).

In literature, the landmark study American Renaissance by F. O. Matthiessen appeared in 1941. It provided "the sort of assurance that we need" in a time of crisis, Spiller observed in a review, because it showed that the nation had developed, and its literature had expressed, "a native myth of the democratic man, capable of all the range of experience of the traditional heroic man." Matthiessen was pleased that Spiller "singled out the democratic strain," for he thought other reviewers had underestimated this aspect of the book. Very likely the same sensitivity to the timeliness of the democratic myth was felt by many of the contributors to the Literary History of the United States (1948), the production of which was planned by Spiller and his collaborators in the wartime years. The ideological note was strongly sounded by at least one of the contributors to the first volume produced by Princeton's Program in American Civilization, Foreign Influences in American Life (1944), and the ethos of a democratic society was explored in Dixon
Wector’s Hero in America (1941) and Constance Rourke’s Roots of American Culture (1942).

Somewhat removed from the history-and-literature mainstream of American studies during its formative years were two books that demand attention nevertheless. Reinhold Niebuhr’s Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense (1944) was perhaps the most profound and original work produced in the democratic revival. It illustrated the relevance of traditional religious ideas to the crisis of the times, and its reception testified to the degree to which secular thinkers were impressed.25 Gunnar Myrdal’s American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944) deserves notice because it stressed the ideological issue so heavily. The “American Creed,” Myrdal stated at the outset, was what held the country together. The dilemma to which his title referred arose precisely because Americans were failing to live up to its prescriptions in the area of race. Yet the “American Creed,” though distinctively American, was at the same time universal, for it was simply an expression of “the common democratic creed” that was derived from “humane ideals as they have matured in our common Western civilization over a number of centuries.”36

Myrdal’s remarks touch on some of the central themes of the democratic revival. Listing them will perhaps help to specify the contention that World War II influenced the development of American studies.

1. We note first that the monstrous contrast of Nazism (and to a lesser extent, totalitarianism in general) was the primary cause of the democratic revival. Carl Becker acknowledged this fact in reaffirming “Some Generalities That Still Glitter,” and Alain Locke said, “Democracy has encountered a fighting antithesis, and has awakened from its considerable lethargy and decadence to a sharpened realization of its own basic values.”27 The “interventionists” in the great debate over American foreign policy were prominent early exponents of the revival and to some extent made democracy a party term; the “isolationists,” however, were equally devoted to democracy—they simply disagreed about how to preserve it.28 The important point is that even intellectuals critical of American social, economic, and cultural weaknesses were aroused by the brutality and terrifying power of the Nazi regime to a warmer appreciation of democratic principles and institutions.

2. Indeed, the threat posed by Nazism to all civilized values led many American observers to identify democracy and its defense with the preservation of Western civilization as such. Mumford’s 1939 tocsin, Men
Must Act, made the logical sequence quite clear: the fourth chapter was entitled “The Barbarian Alternative”; the fifth, “Democracy Equals Civilization”; and the sixth, “The Challenge of the American Heritage.”

Others more detached from the polemics of the neutrality debate also perceived the same associations, as the previously quoted comments of Kazin and Myrdal suggest. Yet controversy arose because different observers stressed contrasting elements in the heritage of Western civilization and offered divergent prescriptions for overcoming the crisis. Especially severe was the split between the “relativists,” who linked democracy with scientific naturalism and the experimental approach, and the “absolutists,” who insisted that the survival of democracy hinged on a return to religion and perennial truths in philosophy and social thought.

3. Despite the controversy, virtually everyone agreed that the United States stood for certain ideas and values, whether they were called “democracy,” “the American Creed,” “the American Dream,” or simply “promises.” Ideology, in other words, was the essential element in the national identity. As James Truslow Adams explained, it was ideas that made us a nation.

Eleanor Roosevelt agreed and went on to draw an important moral:

We know that this country is bound together by an idea. The citizens of this country belong to many races and many creeds. They have come here and built a great Nation around the idea of democracy and freedom. . . . [The present crisis challenges us] to preserve what this country was founded to be, a land where people should have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, regardless of race or creed or color. We have not achieved it. We are very far from it in many ways, but we know that that is what we must achieve.

4. As this quotation makes clear, the ideas that America stood for were normative—they were meant to guide conduct. Talk—or belief—without action was not enough. Democracy was thus more than a political system or an institutional arrangement: it was a way of life. This formula was incorporated into the title of the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, which had strong support from religious traditionalists, but it was also a favorite theme of progressive thinkers like Boyd H. Bode and Sidney Hook. The most influential spokesman for the progressive version of democracy as a way of life was undoubtedly John Dewey, for whom, as J. H. Randall,
Jr., noted, “the democratic life, pursued in conscious unity of interaction with one's fellows,” took on religious quality. 54

5. But a normative way of life was a culture, as anthropologists explained the concept that was rapidly becoming “the foundation stone of the social sciences.” Appropriately enough, it was John Dewey who nailed down the connection in his Freedom and Culture (1939). Alluding to the work of the anthropologists, he declared that the idea of culture put the problem of the individual and society on a new footing. Now the task was to discover the kind of culture that promoted democratic living. In Dewey's thinking, democracy was indissolubly bound to the experimental method and had to be struggled for on “as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic, religious.” 55 Although the most eminent, Dewey was not the only American thinker who espoused a cultural interpretation of democracy. So many others took the same view that eventually America, understood as a functioning democratic culture, itself became normative—that is, America as a practical instance of democracy came to be equated with the abstract ideal of democracy.

Edward A. Purcell's Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value (1973) provides a brilliant analysis of the complex intellectual matrix within which this development occurred. 56 For our purposes, however, the main point is one with which Purcell is not concerned, namely, that the cultural interpretation of democracy brought the ideological revival into close interaction with American studies because understanding the national culture holistically is the task Americanists have always set for themselves. Besides being the implicit (and sometimes explicit) premise of the American studies approach, 57 the idea of culture is also closely related to the wartime boom in national character studies; hence it carries us over to the final topic to be outlined here, the connection between the war and the vogue of American character studies.

Interest in the American character naturally accompanied the democratic revival. The concept of national character had fallen into disrepute in the 1930s because of its association with racial stereotypes, and James Truslow Adams still used quotation marks in November 1940 when he discussed the American “national character” in the context of “the ideas that make us a nation.” Three years later he devoted a full-length book to The American: The Making of a New Man (1943). 58 More influential, however, was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.’s handling of Crèvecoeur’s question, “What then is the American, this new man?” in his December 1942 presidential address before the American Historical Association. This rich
and provocative analysis of the American character was published a month later in the *American Historical Review*, and it reappeared as the opening essay in Schlesinger’s *Paths to the Present* (1949). Yet influential as they were, Schlesinger’s treatment and Denis Brogan’s well-known *American Character* (1944) were relatively old-fashioned analyses by scholars trained in the humanities. What was new in World War II was the claim of social scientists to be pioneering a new approach that redeemed the concept of national character from the taint of racialism and elevated it above the plane of mere belletristic speculation. By the end of the war, people spoke respectfully of the “science of national character,” and for the next ten years it was looked upon as an exciting and important area of study in the social and behavioral sciences.

The war played a crucial role in these developments. When the United States became involved in the conflict, anthropologists and other social scientists were called upon by agencies of the government to apply their skills to such questions as how civilian morale could be maintained, what kind of propaganda could be most effectively employed against the enemy, and how American troops should conduct themselves in foreign lands to minimize friction with the indigenous populations. To answer these questions, scholars such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict applied the perspective of the culture-and-personality school of anthropology, which combined psychological assumptions and ethnographic observation of child-rearing patterns in an effort to determine how the “basic personality structure” characteristic of different cultures was stamped upon the psyches of individuals growing up in those cultures. From here it was only a short step to the study of national character, which the war had made “a matter of grave practical importance,” as Ruth Benedict later wrote. Direct observation of enemy populations was impossible in wartime, but techniques were developed for assessing cultures “at a distance” by means of interviews with native informants, analysis of literature, films, and so on. In response to wartime needs, social scientists plunged into this sort of national character analysis with what Margaret Mead later described as a “kind of fervor.”

Unlike Ruth Benedict, who worked for two years for the Office of War Information, Margaret Mead did not sign on full time with a defense agency. She was, however, actively involved in war-related work as a member of the Committee for National Morale, as executive secretary of the National Research Council’s Committee on Food Habits, and as an informal emissary sent to Great Britain to help improve relations between the British people and the American troops who were crowding into that country. Mead was also the best-known social scientific proponent of

Written in a few weeks, the book was intended as a contribution to the war effort. “Freedom’s battles must be fought by freedom’s own children,” Mead declared, and to do so most effectively they had to know the strengths and weaknesses of their collective personality. Her analysis of the American “character structure” was strictly scientific, she insisted.45 Yet that claim could be justified only on the supposition that, since she thought of herself as a social scientist, she regarded all of her judgments as the products of scientific reasoning. Actually, the book was fully as impressionistic as any humanist’s discussion of American character, though it was, of course, distinctively shaped by Mead’s anthropological perspective and her unusually extensive field experience.

It was also deeply influenced by the democratic revival, which was near its climax when the book appeared. Though not uncritical of American ways, Mead was a decided partisan of democracy, which she understood in the cultural sense—that is, as the name for “a type of behavior and an attitude of mind which runs through our whole culture.”46 More than that, Mead argued that since culture determines character, and since culture itself is learned behavior, a more democratic world order could be brought into being by the application of social engineering techniques. Indeed, she implied that the American drive for success, and the need Americans felt to be morally right in the purposes they pursued, demanded nothing less as the ultimate goal of the war effort than the creation of a new democratic world. There were problems to be sure—such as reconciling democracy with social engineering and finding a way to combine tolerance for diversity with the imperatives of world order—but Mead thought they could be overcome.47 Thus her book, the last chapter of which was entitled “Building the World New,” embodied a nationalistic internationalism that some would consider characteristically American and that anticipated the hubris that postwar social scientists were to display about their ability to reduce “tensions affecting international understanding” through techniques such as the analysis of national characters.48

Mead’s discussion of the American character as such was plausible, but unsurprising; many time-honored themes (individualism, success orientation, the melting pot, the legacies of Puritanism and the frontier) were treated explicitly or lurked just below the surface.49 The most original part of the book was her emphasis on the fixing of cultural characteristics by childhood socialization and her discussion of patterns of
family interaction as a formative influence on the American personality structure. Thus while it was important that a leading anthropologist so roundly affirmed the existence of national character as a scientifically reputable reality, it was perhaps even more important that Mead’s highly informal treatment of the subject overlapped at so many points with traditional approaches and thereby tacitly conveyed the impression that anyone could become a scientific commentator by spicing the standard literary and historical materials with a few concepts taken from social psychology.

Mead’s *And Keep Your Powder Dry* and Benedict’s book on the Japanese, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), were the first major social scientific studies of national character, although there were several shorter essays and many allusions to the subject during the wartime years. In the postwar period the floodgates opened. Among the most significant works by social scientists were Geoffrey Gorer’s *American People* (1948), a prepublication summary of which appeared in *Life* magazine; Erik H. Erikson’s “Reflections on the American Identity,” which was chapter eight of *Childhood and Society* (1950); David Riesman’s fabulously popular *Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950); and David Potter’s *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954), a provocative attempt by a historian to appropriate the methodological insights of the culture-and-personality school.

There is no room to document the assertion that the effort to understand the American character was central to American studies in the decade after World War II. Yet as anyone familiar with the movement in those days could testify, that was almost its definition. Despite the pretensions to clinical rigor on the part of social scientists, national character was an inescapably diffuse notion referring broadly to the body of ideals, values, and cultural traits held in common by the members of a given national culture. Hence, as Max Lerner pointed out at the time, the American character was spoken of interchangeably with the American mind, the American spirit, the American tradition, the American creed, the American civilization (the phrase Lerner himself preferred), or the American way of life. Yet these were precisely the topics in which the increasingly self-conscious devotees of American studies were interested. Whether they approached their task by elucidating American symbols and myths, by employing traditional literary or historical methods of narrative and textual analysis, or by drawing on the social sciences, they could all legitimately think of themselves as seeking to illuminate the mysteries of the American character. What I have tried to show here is
that World War II exerted a profound though hitherto unrecognized influence on their work by giving new visibility and respectability to national character studies and, even more decisively, by causing American scholars to appreciate more deeply the positive values embodied in the nation’s social, political, and cultural traditions.

NOTES


The Development of an American Culture. 2d ed. (New York, 1983), 220ff., quotation from 227.


15. Committee of Fifteen, The City of Man: A Declaration on World Democracy (New York, 1941). Among the names on the title page of this booklet were: G. A. Borgese, Van Wyck Brooks, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Alvin Johnson, Hans Kohn, Thomas Mann, Lewis Mumford, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Gaetano Salvemini.

of the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University, 1941 (New York, 1941), 100–19.

17. See chap. 6.

18. Douglas, who told this story in a speech given before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, treated democracy very reverently. It was no “mere shibboleth” but “a word to fill the heart with pride.” See William O. Douglas, “The Function of Democracy,” in Representative American Speeches 1940–1941, which is vol. 15, no. 1, of the Reference Shelf (New York, 1941), 225.


21. In the interest of saving space, no additional publication information will be given for this title, or others adduced as evidence of interest in the topic of democracy, unless a page citation is needed. Full bibliographical information is easily accessible through standard reference works such as The National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints.


24. “What really stirs our hearts and minds is our set of ideals and values. Often we do not realize explicitly what these are until they are threatened. But in the present crisis we know with our inmost being how dear to us are our American ideals of democracy, decency, and individual freedom, our belief in free speech and in free elections and in the right to worship as we choose, our family mores, our religious faith, our respect for certain symbols which convey these ideals to our attention (the American flag, for example).” James G. Leyburn, “The Problem of Ethnic and National Impact from a Sociological Point of View,” in David F. Bowers, ed., Foreign Influences in American Life (Princeton, N.J., 1944), 60.

25. For discussion, see Edward A. Purcell, Jr., The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value (Lexington, Ky., 1973), 243–47.


29. Lewis Mumford, Men Must Act (New York, 1939). In a later chapter on revitalizing democracy at home, Mumford acknowledged “that it is only by comparison with totalitarian countries that democracy may be said to flourish in America” (144).
30. Purcell, Crisis of Democratic Theory, chaps. 8–12; Tead, “Survey and Critique.”


37. See Purcell, Crisis of Democratic Theory, esp. 211–17, and chaps. 13–14.


39. Adams, “Ideas That Make Us a Nation,” 3; Adams, The American: The Making of a New Man (New York, 1943). For the discrediting of national character by racial associations, see David Potter, People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character (Chicago, 1954), 26, 31, 32, 38, 57. In this connection, it is interesting that a comprehensive survey of “alleged American characteristics, ideals, and principles,” which was published in 1941, did not once make use of the expression national character and the closest it came to American character was in a reference to “the amazing diversity of American life and character.” See Lee Coleman, “What Is American? A Study of Alleged American Traits,” Social Forces, 19 (1941), 492–99. The major historical analysis of American character studies is Thomas L. Hartshorne. The Distorted Image: Changing Conceptions of the American Character since Turner (Cleveland, Ohio, 1968); and among the most recent additions to this immense literature are Rupert Wilkerson, “American Character Revisited,” Journal of American


46. Ibid., 20.


49. Mead listed the features of the American character as follows: 1) is geared to success and movement; 2) is ambivalent about aggressiveness; 3) measure success quantitatively in comparison with contemporaries; 4) interprets success and failure as indications of moral worth; 5) is uninterested in the past; 6) is oriented toward the future; and 7) is ambivalent toward other cultures. And Keep Your Powder Dry, 193–94.


52. Max Lerner, “The Idea of American Civilization,” Journal of Social Issues, 7 (1951), 30–39. The definition of national character as embracing ideals, values, and cultural traits is also taken from this essay, which was revised as chap. 2 of Lerner’s America as a Civilization (New York, 1957). Margaret Mead discussed national character as an area of common interest to historians and anthropologists in one of the early volumes of American Quarterly. See Mead, “Anthropologist and Historian: Their Common Problems,” American Quarterly, 3 (1951), 8–9.