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Title

Stephen Shapiro

Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *Novels in the Time of Democratic Writing: The American Example* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 264 pp.

Joe Shapiro, *The Illiberal Imagination: Class and the Rise of the U.S. Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 278 pp.

Literary and cultural studies of the US between the 1780s and 1830s have continually faced a unique burden within the larger domain of American studies, let alone the humanities in general. Within the field, this period has often been the subject of genteel lack of interest. Even when significant US-based Americanist scholars publish research within the time frame, the organic relation between this study and their larger reputation is often overlooked. The phase also faces categorical and political challenges. The still dominant designation of “early” (early American Republic, early national, and so on) casts a strong developmental undertow that inevitably presents its cultural production as prefatory, a prelude to more important, or at least more fully established, movements to come. Additionally, the productive tension between history and literature (broadly understood) that once animated American studies was and is more imbalanced here than elsewhere. The dominant forms of Anglo-American historiography have a greater grip on the years before 1850 as the major intermural research institutions and grant opportunities are unquestionably organized from the vantage of history departments. Historically, and certainly before digitization’s relative diminishing of the locational advantage of (East) coastal institutions, the geographic democratization of the later 1700s and early 1800s was slower to materialize than for later periods in American Studies. Lastly, and most importantly, the cultural study of this period has, arguably, long existed under the force of right-wing political policing and associated publishing markets, due to its proximity to constitutional origination. Indeed, were it not for the openings provided by critical slavery studies, work on settler colonialism and indigeneity, and, to a lesser degree,

the new environmental humanities, scholars of this literary-cultural field might still have little room to maneuver.

Cultural studies of the early republic and national period have also faced the continuing presence of four narrative mythologies about the US. Firstly, largely due to the success of a broad interregional group of nineteenth-century writers, who function as both powerful exemplars for their own time and as consecrated evidentiary foundations for the establishment of American studies as a discipline throughout most of the twentieth century, the idea came about that the American Revolution directly responded to the general crisis of the seventeenth century, rather than a conflict embedded within the long spiral of resistance to British mercantilism. Thanks to authors like Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville, later scholars took it as self-evident that the new confederation and constitutional nation was created as an exercise in antinomianism rather than as a result of British difficulties in establishing and maintaining their first, “informal” Empire before the demise of Napoleon. In ways that have been little investigated, the writers of the 1830s onwards themselves to an invention of the seventeenth century, much as British Americans had for Roman history during the eighteenth. For a host of conjunctural reasons, not least being the search for a body of rhetorical justifications by the North for a legitimating *casus belli* for imminent sectional conflict, a wrinkle in time brought the seventeenth century in contact with the nineteenth that left the two decades on both sides of 1800 dislocated from the construction of a larger tale of US identity and what American studies understood as its proprietary archive.

The obscuring of the actual context for American independence has also made it hard to fully calibrate the effects of how a dominant interpretation of Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations* arose in the early nineteenth century and became so dominant that it no longer saw itself as an interpretation at all. This version, which continues nearly unabated today, reads Smith as an advocate of competitive individuality rather than as a secular thinker grounded in the pursuit of sensibilitarian communality. Smith’s arguments for the invisible hand of the market place him close to the period’s deist notion of God as the absent clockmaker, and Smith’s antistatism is directed against *ancien regime* mercantilism, not social democracy or New Deal/welfare state formations.

The result of this erasure of Smith’s actual intellectual and social contexts has been that we currently lack a supple analytic terminology for distinguishing the important differences between eighteenth-century laissez-faire and the “free trade” imperial

expansionism of the early nineteenth century, and how the movement, as it were, from Smith to Ricardo was intertwined with the onset of Romantic-era literary nationalism and bourgeois interiority in order to fabulate an organic national lineage.

Another way to pose this problem is to note how an overarching term—liberalism—has been used in too general, too gross, a fashion to capture the differences between eighteenth-century antimerchantism, nineteenth-century free (imperialist) trade, and mid-twentieth-century New Deal and military Keynesianism. Nearly a decade ago, in what retrospectively seems youthful optimism, I tried to put the liberalism-republicanism debate to bed as a question that could not be answered due to the incoherence and internally contradictory nature of these categories. What I had not seen was how the imminent debate over the meaning and provenance of neoliberalism would necessarily reinvigorate the zombie concept of liberalism or how one reinterpretation of republicanism would become subsumed within and recirculated in discussions over “the commons.” Now it seems clearer that such keywords locate a tension between egalitarian desires and the marketplace that is better seen as the structuring proposition of American studies as a discipline, its actual problematic, more than that of national exceptionalism. As long as we use the category of American studies, we will be enmeshed within iterations of the republican-liberalism debate.

One aspect of this antinomy appears with the third powerful mythology, which believes that Americans immediately operated under the weight of a sense of cultural and social inferiority to England that manifested itself in the spectrum of emulation or self-defensive antagonism. This idea of immanent cultural cringe and “post”-colonial subalternity was, indeed, a creation of the late nineteenth century, partly the result of how strands of American fiction, such as the later Henry James, responded to the presence of Gilded Age robber barons whose conspicuous consumption sought to sanitize and celebrate their greed by marrying their daughters to played-out English aristocrats.

Yet well past the Civil War, Americans knew England as a socially backwards land whose General Intellect was mainly insufficient to handle the task of participating in the modern world. From Washington Irving’s sketchbook tales and George Lippard’s condemnation in *Quaker City* of Dora Livingstone’s desire for a landed title through Melville’s “Paradise of Bachelors” and Twain’s lampooning of Walter Scott-isms, Americans were confident in their lack of any need to consider England as anything other than an object

of pity. This absence of emulation may, after all, mark one actual feature that distinguishes Americans from other Anglophone settler colonies.

Yet this diffidence toward England should not be mistaken as the absence of perceived subordination. For if there was a nation that the educated American elites looked to for inspiration, it was clearly Germany as seen in early James with Basil Ransom's admiring gaze on his Cambridge, Massachusetts cousin's subscription to the *Berliner Monatsschrift* or Basil March's insistence in Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889/90) that his son be tutored to read German lyric in the original. When Americans went abroad for education, they ventured to Berlin, Göttingen, or Heidelberg. Oxford and Cambridge were simply considered as havens of involuted nonsense. Only as a result of the tremendous cultural amnesia enforced in the wake of the World Wars was the long duration of German influence and aura forgotten, precisely when early forms of American studies began to construct a narrative justification for its existence as an academic discipline.

The fourth major mythology was due to the inability of tourists to discern the unremarked power of the past. Here I mean mainly those French claims by Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville that the US was able to develop as an unretarded democracy because it had no established landlord aristocracy that had to be overcome. Yet while there might not have been de facto titles of lineage, in every state, both North and South, there were clearly known oligarchies of (landed) power that maintained limits to popular control. Alexander Hamilton had his career because he married into the Van Rensselaer clan, one of the richest and most powerful of post-Independence New York. Even while the expulsion of American Tories made it seem as if a gentry class was absent, the continuing power of patriot-landed and status clans was arguably more significant than the onset of political parties. It was perhaps only with the move toward free trade that the slow disestablishment of the landed forces began, and even then, more clearly in the North rather than the South's slave manorial regions.

These mythologies are challenged and reinforced in various ways by two studies of emergent US writing: Joe Shapiro's *The Illiberal Imagination: Class and the Rise of the U.S. Novel* and Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse's *Novels in the Time of Democratic Writing: The American Example*. Both are excellent, insightful, and incisive studies that deserve to be required reading within all of American studies as they variously seek to address the larger question of liberalism, whether explicitly or structurally. They are similar in their approach of reading self-consciously fictional texts as illustrations of their chosen five

genres or narrative devices that characterize US writing from the 1790s until the 1830s (Shapiro) or 1850s (Armstrong and Tennenhouse). The two monographs are easily paired because they often devote themselves to considerations of the same texts. For instance, both suggest that Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799) should stand as the most significant and exemplary US novel until roughly the 1840s. Yet despite their organizational similarities and mutual interest in particular titles, their methodology is vastly different, their claims ultimately incompatible, and their implied politics are divergent.

Shapiro (no relation) situates his study between two critical poles. The first involves Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) and Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). Trilling exemplifies the claims of Cold War liberal pluralism that sought to define an American identity, and inferentially legitimate its postwar, anti-Communist global hegemony, by arguing that American literature was a statement of national exceptionalism as the US novel arose in contrast to the otherwise prerequisite social conditions from which the Anglo-European novel emerged. For Trilling, the "real basis of the novel has never existed" in the US because "the tension between a middle class and an aristocracy which brings manners into observable relief" (qtd. in Shapiro, 1) was absent. Hartz likewise felt that American political history was free from class conflict and Europe's proletarian radicalism because the US did not experience the need for an insurgent bourgeoisie to confront a local gentry in ways that would inevitably result in the generation of working-class conflict. Because Americans did not need a domestic bourgeois revolution, presumably because its results were carried over by seventeenth-century English émigrés, Hartz felt that Americans could stride the new continent as fully-fledged liberals, not as a "member of a class" but "instead as self-possessing individuals in a society that is essentially fluid" (2).

Shapiro flatly disagrees. His core claim is that "the consolidation of the early U.S. novel *includes* the representation of class struggle, and that the early U.S. novel helps to consolidate the U.S. bourgeoisie precisely through its representations of class inequality and class struggle" (3). Postwar advocates of liberalism promulgated circulationist claims in order to intertwine narratives of social mobility and free trade alongside developmental predicates, and thus to resist suspiciously marxist New Deal market controls and purportedly Communist Party "lines" of the midcentury Cultural Front. Shapiro argues instead that because of the intentional and integral role of class control in early American writing, if there is a

foundational national imagination, it is more accurately defined as *illiberal*. From the inception of the US novel, authors crafted an ensemble of generic “rejoinders to emergent forms of oppositional political economy” (189) that either seek to “teach us that disaffection with class inequality breeds dangerous desires and unleashes dangerous behaviors” or “that class inequality is itself good for individuals, and that classes should not be thought of as fundamentally antagonistic” (192-93).

On first glance, Shapiro’s chosen confrontation with Trilling and Hartz might seem to be its own form of antiquarianism. After all, Trilling’s and Hartz’s anti-Communism seems an obsolete position in the post-1989 era. Not only would one be hard pressed to find serious (or at least currently influential) proponents of this claim of classless America, but even harder pressed to find members of Shapiro’s scholarly generation (or younger!) who are even familiar with these 1950s positions, which are most likely no longer present on comprehensive exams. The force then of *Illiberal Imagination*’s project comes with Shapiro’s conclusion that addresses the new congeries of surface, descriptive, or postcritique criticism. While Shapiro is willing to divorce himself from symptomatic or depth reading, not least because he does not see early US writing as *hiding* the presence of oppositional political economy, he is less willing to abandon the notion of critique. Such a move he finds to be its own form of (bourgeois) complicity with existing structures of power as well as being coeval with contemporary (neoliberal) claims that there is no utopian alternative to the social orders on offer today. Shapiro thus raises a question about the structural and tactical similarities between Trilling’s insistence on the individual complexity of texts, which nonetheless buttresses a collective, market-oriented national identity, as a means of excluding or baiting left modes of scholarship, and contemporary instances of postcritique. For *Illiberal Imagination* implies that Rita Felski’s rejection of context functions to give a new tongue to Trilling’s denunciation of his own colleagues’ socially oriented literary criticism.

Shapiro contends that the early American novel’s dedication to instantiating economic inequality can be seen at the level of form with the use of five subgenres: the bildungsroman, the episodic travel narrative, the sentimental novel, the frontier romance, and the antislavery novel. Each genre handles one of a shared, multifaceted perspective. The bildungsroman is preoccupied with poverty and wage labor. Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond* are read as aspirational tales that suggest that poverty is a useful stage for the individual to forge character on their way to a higher-class station, usually achieved through

unexpectedly bequeathed wealth or marriage. For Shapiro, Brown presents a Wollstonecraftian critique about those who are born into wealth as too physically and morally compromised, while those who have experience initial hardship are better trained to leadership. On the other hand, those who do not cheerfully accept their poverty are positioned as villains, unworthy of reward. No complaints, please, we're American.

If the bildungsroman is disinclined to examine the original separation of class and its social selection, the picaresque tale, represented by Hugh Henry Breckenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), stages a more explicit commitment to rule by a lettered class of economic and educated elites. While the bildungsroman motivates a tale of upward movement, the episodic travel narrative tends to repetitive events to indicate that the absence of social mobility is best for all. Hence, the bildungsroman and the picaresque are "different but complementary: if Brockden Brown's novels function as apprenticeships to 'poverty,' *Modern Chivalry* conversely stands as a defense of 'the Few'" (75) in ways that suggest that the novel's readers should also feel confirmed in this elite by their own textual consumption.

Illiberal Imagination then jumps from the 1790s to the 1830s for its three other genre categories. Catherine M. Sedgwick's *The Poor Rich Man, and the Rich Poor Man* (1836) and *Live and Let Live* (1836) are read as consciously hostile to emerging socialist utopian thought as the novels use a providential logic in order to validate inequality. The rich, as Shapiro reads Sedgwick, should strive for justice and mercy to the poor, but the poor need to enact humility, fidelity, and gratitude. Any nascent anticapitalist class-consciousness by proletarians must be blocked by the celebration of sentimental, paternalist relations James Fenimore Cooper's Littlepage novels—*Satanstoe* (1845), *The Chainbearer* (1846) and *The Redskins* (1846)—written amidst the Anti-Rent Wars of 1839-47 that threatened large landowners, such as Cooper himself, exemplify the frontier romance. As Marius Bewley wrote in 1959, "Cooper's aim was to praise landed wealth, transmitted through families, at the expense of wealth gained by speculation or industrial enterprise" (qtd. in 136). Shapiro adds that Cooper's novels also mobilize a defense of "democratic marriage practices and the affective autonomy of middle-class women" as imperiled by land reformers' critiques of rentier ownership. The trick of the books is to persuade middle-class readers that agrarian egalitarianism threatens the freedom of companionate marriage and to suggest to working-class readers, in turn, the benefits of racial privilege if they distance their concerns from Native Americans and black slaves about being bound to a land controlled by others.

Shapiro's last genre choice involves Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* (1856), which offers a mechanism of expression for ending class inequality among whites, by presenting the existence of slavery as blocking class equality in both the North and South. Yet by highlighting slavery as a means of degrading the Northern working class, Stowe simultaneously distracts the reader from an ensuing critique of capitalism that may explain why class inequality exists in the first place.

Illiberal Imagination is adroitly argued and presents a refreshingly different cartography of American letters as each chapter takes up lesser-known texts to unsettle the field's assumptions that had been protected by selective reading lists. Yet does the periodization impact the discussion of genre and American particularity? Is there an integrating coherence between the 1790s and 1830s, in terms of market forms, industrialization, slavery and Native American removals, political partisanship, and the commercial market for fiction? Are Shapiro's five genres uniformly present or do they change density in relation to historical transformations? While separating the genres out is doubtless a momentary heuristic for the purpose of clarity, few texts are easily separated in this fashion. The cross-hatching of different generic modes also gives texts a complexity that enables readers to consume them in different ways. For instance, while Shapiro favorably contrasts the radical intent of George Lippard's *Quaker City* (1844) against Stowe's *Dred*, Lippard's final pairing of Luke Harvey and Devil-Bug's daughter is similar to how Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* concludes with Mervyn's marriage to Achsa, a daughter of the socially excluded. What then allows *Quaker City* to escape Shapiro's critique of *Arthur Mervyn*? While he persuasively accounts for the initial American novel's engagement with class, to what degree, if any, can these moves be considered as particularly, or even especially, American?

Shapiro's study makes for a useful contrast to Armstrong and Tennenhouse's *Novels in the Time of Democratic Writing*. A product of long and estimable careers, Armstrong and Tennenhouse's study seeks to reshape the way we understand inaugural American novelistic writing. Whereas Shapiro's study focuses on much lesser-known novels, Armstrong and Tennenhouse's does this as well, but also boldly addresses some of the most familiar texts of Poe and Cooper, as well as figures now better-read within the revised canon.

Challenging Benedict Anderson's claim in *Imagined Communities* that print capitalism created what Marx called an "illusory community" [*illusorische*

Gemeinschaftlichkeit] in *The German Ideology*, Armstrong and Tennenhouse point to Anderson's admission that he had incompletely considered global currents in his focus on the trajectory of individual nations. Consequently, they claim that "if 'nations and the nation states' had to be rethought in relation to global 'currents' then novels had to be rethought in these terms as well" (5). Deploying network theory, Armstrong and Tennenhouse's basic claims are that there is such a thing as the "American novel," that it was established in sole opposition to the "British novel," and that it did so by rejecting the latter's commitment to hierarchical territory in favor of a dedication to ongoing movement. By creating a networked form of address, wherein all could equally address all, American "novelists produced a social system that succeeded in recruiting early American readers" into a national collective (10).

Using Austen's novels as their normative model for the British novel, Armstrong and Tennenhouse assert that such narratives are organized by the fear that "inherited property is in danger of falling into the hands of strangers, thereby threatening to leave the next generation—largely represented by women—without a home or income" (20). To preserve land ownership, Austen perfects a formal technique of personal appropriateness, involving the right to maintain land ownership, not in simply labouring it, as with Locke's justification, but by typifying a behavioral style of "education, taste, and sensibility" (21). Thus "Austen addressed the problem of property by means of marriage plots that supplemented inherited property with commercial wealth, intelligence, a fine sensibility, and social benevolence . . . to expand a relatively exclusive set of relationships" (27). Although not expressed in these terms, Armstrong and Tennenhouse claim that the British novel (of Austen and Scott primarily) depend on what Gramsci would call a restoration without revolution, the establishment of a bourgeois faction that assumes a leadership role by helping to create a social coalition between eighteenth-century rentiers, who were slipping into crisis, and the emerging wealth of plantation and industry wherein access to gentry status will now be less by blood lineage than through a form of bourgeois *mésalliance* sealed by gentle(wo)manly style, behavioral attributes, and perception. In this fusion of aesthetics and property, readers of fine prose can imagine themselves as likely inhabitants of the manor as much as the novel's fictional characters.

The US tradition, exemplified by *Arthur Mervyn*, rejects the varnished Austenian compromise between landed and bourgeois interests. Instead of seeking geographic fixity, the American novel, as Armstrong and Tennenhouse define it, dedicates itself to circulationist

principles, which we might say register the presence of free trade and antitariff ideology. American identity is thus based not on aspects of appropriateness, but a dedication to a mobile network that legitimates (frontier) nationality. “Insofar as property removed such people, goods, and information from circulation and limited the extent of such circulation itself,” it could not “provide the foundation of a social system that could expand and diversify and still cohere” (10). For Armstrong and Tennenhouse, early American novels put “considerable labor in a sequence of five formal moves, or tropes” (10-11) in order to reverse “a comparable move on the part of British novels of the period” (11). The five moves are dispersal, population by minor characters, a conversion from captivity toward a “highly volatile network of horizontal affiliations,” the creation of a hub or relay of social interaction, and a form of anamorphosis that requires a complete set of perspectival angles (10-12).

In each of these forms, Armstrong and Tennenhouse suggest that the American novel was dedicated to (Smithian) liberalism, understood as the need to remove all social and geographic friction that might slow, obstruct, or redirect flowing circulation. Democracy is thus defined not as a mode of representative government, but by “the infectious feeling of affiliation” manifested “in the forms of behavior characterized as popular democracy” that “opens up unlimited circulation and . . . freedom to associate” (12).

For readers to gain the full reach of Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s readings, they have to take as axiomatic that American readers and writers were hermetically sealed away from continental languages and literary traditions, that both British and American writing was fairly homogeneous in its construction, and that racial and class inequalities are easily made unremarkable through movement, even for the dispersions experienced by Native and black Americans. For instance, their introductory chapter ends by using the dyad of American mobility and British fixity to interpret the canon: “What are the twin protagonists of *Huckleberry Finn*, after all, if not more companionable but no less incompatible actors in exactly this argument—Huck the errant principle of free circulation and preferential attachments and Tom the principle of a community linked to and supported by property” (16). Yet most readers after Leo Marx consider that the novel’s dynamics are actually generated in the first instance by the self-emancipating slave Jim, whose flight is that which mobilizes the novel’s opposition of Huck and Tom. Similarly, by using the category “early American literary studies” to include slave narratives of the 1850s, Armstrong and Tennenhouse both avoid the question of intervening historical thresholds, but also functionally use “early” to

replace “antebellum,” a term that for all its imprecision does make the role of slavery central to the period’s historical narrative.

In this way, Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s study usefully collides with Shapiro’s. Both suggest that Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* ought to be taken as a touchstone for the American novel before Hawthorne or Melville. While Armstrong and Tennenhouse see Brown as preserving society through movement, Shapiro sees Arthur’s ultimate matrimonial settlement as a tactic of privilege and inequality that functions analogously to Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s reading of Austen.

An old joke goes that network theory is what is left over when one starts with cultural materialism and strips out capitalism, class (and other forms of) struggle, and the catalysts of historical transformation. Yet such is the sophistication of *Novels* that only a small translation of their keywords into more materialist ones may open it up for a larger readership. For instance, we might replace the term of *dispersion* with the one of *accumulation* by dispossession, and likewise substitute *commodity chains* for *population*, *exchange-value* for *conversion*, *marketplaces* for *hubs*, and the *totality of the expanded circuit of capital* for *anamorphosis*.

Armstrong and Tennenhouse intriguingly end their study by claiming that Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* introduced a new framework that vanquished the network novel of initial American writing and bequeathed the resulting lack of interest in the period’s fiction. They read Cooper as producing a new model of liberal pluralism as it includes the experiences of Native and black Americans in ways that allow ethnic white Americans to both lay claim to these other groups’ presence while also ensuring their structural erasure. Although Armstrong and Tennenhouse do not use these terms, the conceptual torque of their claims means that they anachronistically read *The Last of the Mohicans* as the first military Keynesian novel, so that the 1820s stand as the start of a phase that continues unchanged throughout the 1950s and beyond. To reclaim the promise of the network novel before Cooper, Armstrong and Tennenhouse suggest we need to embark on postpluralist literary studies. While it would be ungenerous to merely label this position as a form of center-left neoliberalism, it would equally be wrong to overlook the study’s theorized commitment to a mode of reading that Shapiro might suggest that we have not yet entirely earned the right to accumulate.

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