

An Interview With Lawrence W. Levine

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Lawrence W. Levine,¹ the Margaret Byrne Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, is a leading figure in the study of American culture. His 1977 book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, is seen as a central work in contemporary folklore scholarship. His latest book, *High Brow/Low Brow*, regarding the development of cultural hierarchy in the late nineteenth century, has also received wide attention in the scholarly community. While researching his work during my studies at George Washington University, I had the opportunity to hold a brief interview with Levine. What follows is the product of that discussion, conducted via AT&T, speaker-phone, and hand-held cassette recorder. The transcript has been edited to communicate a concrete sense of the issues discussed; clarification of some of the content was made in order to aid those unfamiliar with the material. This will help the reader get a sense of Levine's own view of the field. Levine's response to specific questions about his work, influences, and experiences should help illuminate some of the current issues within folklore scholarship.

It is useful for young scholars to understand Levine's contribution to the study of American culture, for his work addresses many of the important issues of the day. Levine's work is considered that of a cultural historian, investigating dynamics of cultural development and change. However, the impact of his work is often seen to be that of a "New Social Historian." This means he has given attention to, and helped legitimize, the study of so-called nonmainstream groups, such as blacks, women, and immigrants, all of which have come to influence the content and direction of our contemporary culture.

MILLER: The focus of my class is folklore scholarship. My goal is not to create a comprehensive biography but to get an understanding of *your* sense of the field, your orientation to the field, some of your influences and contacts, and what you might see as coming developments. I've got some questions here that we can follow along

LEVINE: You've got some kind of machine going, right?

MILLER: Yeah, I've got you on speaker phone and a little hand held-cassette recorder going here In 1962 you went to Berkeley, right?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MILLER: Under what circumstances was that?

LEVINE: I had begun teaching on a college level—I had been a junior high school teacher for several years, and then I went and got my Ph.D. Then my first job was with the City College of New York. I taught Western Civilization, which most young people taught in those days, and then I was offered a job at Princeton University in the History Department there. I went there and spent '61 and '62 there as an instructor. I was then offered an assistant professorship at Berkeley. Princeton promoted me also to assistant professor, so I had to choose between the two. For reasons which have never been clear to me, I came to Berkeley. Maybe it was the challenge of coming three thousand miles away from everything I knew, everyone I knew, I don't know, but I came here. So then the circumstances were "normal"—I was looking for a job.

MILLER: I heard that you first got a grant in 1965 from the Social Science Research Council?

LEVINE: Yeah. My dissertation was in book form by 1965, it was published in '65, and at that point I was beginning a second book. I was very active in the Civil Rights Movement and I honestly wasn't sure what I wanted to do for a second book. Then it hit me one day like that ad says, "I coulda had a V-8," and it struck me that I could combine my activism and my scholarship, which seemed to me to be wonderful, through the study of black protest—which is the way the second book began. So that's what I decided to do. I got a grant

from the Social Science Research Council to begin research for a book, which was then called, "Patterns of Negro Protest Thought in Twentieth Century America."

MILLER: Well that was one of my questions: How did you get interested in Afro-American history?—through activism. That's pretty clear.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, of course one could argue "putting the cart before the horse or the horse before the cart" here. I mean maybe I got interested in activism through interest in Afro-Americans, but whatever it was, we can trace that back to the time I was a young teenager, and became a jazz aficionado. I hung around jazz joints at the age of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. I began to collect jazz records, and you know, all of that. So that put me, actively and overtly, in contact with Afro-American culture, and with a lot of Afro-American people for that matter, so who knows? My activity in civil rights may have grown out of the culture, and as you know, it's hard to separate these things.

MILLER: Right. I want to ask some specific things from articles that you and others have written. In "The Historian and the Culture Gap" you cite Joseph Levenson's line regarding intellectual history being 'not of thought, but of men thinking' I've found that idea throughout a lot of your writings. When did you first come into contact with that idea or Dr. Levenson?

LEVINE: Well, he was here, when I got to Berkeley; he was my colleague. I don't know, he was about ten years older than I was, something like that, and he was . . . a brilliant man, maybe one of the few brilliant men I've ever known. So I respected him profoundly. He did very difficult work to follow—in other words, he wasn't writing for large numbers of people—he was writing very difficult intellectual history on China. And the reason I mention his complexity is because it is interesting. I mean he himself wrote a very complex brand of history, and himself studied "great minds," but I think he studied them in ways which tried to use them to understand the culture. Which is what I was doing. But I wasn't studying the great minds (per se). I was doing the Bryan book in which I was trying to use a leader to understand the followers.

MILLER: So you consciously made it a point of your work.

LEVINE: Well I did in my study of William Jennings Bryan, and that was before I met Joe Levenson, when I wrote that dissertation at Columbia University. Joe Levenson really, in a sense, gave me a justification for what I in fact had already done. I didn't call my Bryan book intellectual history, and I didn't call my Afro-American book intellectual history, and I don't insist on calling them that, but indeed I think they are that. The reason that the discipline I'm in doesn't call what I write intellectual history is because it's about . . . plain folk. The term cultural history wasn't that common when I was a graduate student. When I was a graduate student we didn't hear about cultural history, or cultural historians. . . . There were social historians, political historians, and things like that, but I don't remember cultural historians being a big number. I begin to think that the term began to be more actively used when people like me began to turn to the minds of folk. And what did you call that? It wasn't quite social history, it didn't deal with institutions; it wasn't intellectual history because people, you know, have difficulty calling spirituals, gospel music, things like that, intellectual history. So they began to call it cultural history, and that was OK with me. . . . I have no problem with that, but in a way I think it was, it is a form of intellectual history, and I think that Joe Levenson, who didn't do that kind of history, nevertheless understood that intellectual history wasn't just the history of great minds, or the history of thought. It was the history of people thinking. That just struck me instantly as true.

MILLER: In some schools, that idea has been applied pretty widely, I think, such as at George Washington University. But do you feel this approach has been applied widely or is it still relatively contained?

LEVINE: Well, I think it's more widely applied all the time. Saying that, however, I also have to say that the University remains one of the chief bastions of the old cultural hierarchy. It's being worn down, and if it wasn't being worn down you wouldn't have people like ex-Secretary of Education Bennett and Allan Bloom and all those people running around. I mean, one of the things that agitates them is exactly the growing application of this notion. The anthropological notion of culture applied to other disciplines. It's OK if anthropology uses that holistic notion of culture on the Fiji Islands. It doesn't bother anybody. But if you start to use that notion of culture on Americans, or Europeans then it is troublesome. And a lot of anthropologists by the way are troubled themselves by it, but of course a lot of them resist the use of this concept . . . for America. Or

Europe. They're much happier dealing with people in Asia and islands. . .

MILLER: . . . some distance away?

LEVINE: Some distance away. In other words you look at that culture as holistic, and you try to understand it in total terms, everything coming out of a matrix, and everything reflecting things about the whole culture. But when you start arguing for your own culture, that comic books can be an important medium for understanding the culture, then they find all kinds of reasons to tell you, well, it's not the same thing. By the way, I just was at Harvard. I was looking at the Afro-American department and we questioned a lot of chairmen of other departments to see if they were willing to go along with Afro-American studies in making appointments. And I had occasion to ask—I was just playing devil's advocate because I knew the answers—I asked the chairman of the anthropology department, asked the chairman of the fine arts department, whether they studied the United States and I knew the answer: of course they don't study the United States. They just don't do it. The notion of culture that was most congenial to the Universities, until recently, was Matthew Arnold's notion of culture. The anthropological notion of what culture is didn't catch on in the United States until well into the twentieth-century. And it's still fighting a battle to catch on in the Universities. Your question, what you said, I think is right. In some schools, like yours, obviously it's gone farther than others, and it's probably having its most difficulty making its way in the very elite schools.

MILLER: Yes. But actually, where that idea has made progress, your work is cited as a great example of what can be done. Anyway, in some of your work in Afro-American folklore, you cite Roger Abrahams as being a great help in getting your orientation to the field.

LEVINE: Yes.

MILLER: How did you actually get in contact with him, and . . .

LEVINE: I never did, actually. I've met Roger Abrahams two or three times at parties, but I don't think I've said more than, you know, twelve words to him.

MILLER: Oh really?

LEVINE: Yeah. I've never really met him. I've met him at Alan Dundes' house in Berkeley, and I've met him at conventions of the (American) Folklore Society. But I've never really sat down and had a proper talk with Roger Abrahams. I got to know him the way one often gets to know scholars and maybe one should get to know scholars and that's through his books. I wandered into a bookshop in New York, in . . . the early sixties, whenever it was, and I was just beginning to think about black folklore, and black culture, and picked up his book, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, and the original edition had a little note inside it, saying, "this book is for purchase only by anthropologists, psychologists," blah blah, and other bona fide scholars. And then I began to flip through the book and my mind was blown, because I saw the words "motherfucker," and "cocksucker," and "shit," and I mean that was when—this was very close to the time when kids were being arrested on the Berkeley campus for reading pages from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I literally mean that. Lenny Bruce was being harassed to his death because he used the word "fuck" in nightclubs . . . and then there's a scholar who dared walk into a black neighborhood, copy down the original words these people were speaking and publish them. He had guts enough to publish them, no matter how they covered it with this stuff about "bona fide scholars" and I bought that book and I took it home. Now I grew up in a rough immigrant neighborhood in the ghetto, and we had absorbed a lot of black culture without knowing it, cause you don't know these things. We used "motherfucker" all the time, we played "the dozens" which we called "slipping." And I sat down and read Roger Abrahams' book and the minute I read that book I realized that, without knowing much folklore yet, that all the other folklorists had been expurgating. It occurred to me that they had been expurgating. But I know the way the folk talk, I had been a "folk" very early, and I had been in the streets of New York, and I had never (yet) come across any of those words, that I had used, and that I knew people used, in folklore studies and collections. And suddenly when I read Abrahams I said, "Of course! That's the way . . ."; I mean these words are *used*. And so I found that interesting. Now there's censorship on both sides; I understood that the folk themselves were censoring. There are things, words, you don't use in front of little old ladies collecting folklore, or your employer, or the ministerial-looking man who came around with the rimless glasses, you know, who came collecting folklore. But it was very important for me to understand that there were lots of

instances of the folklorists expurgating. I understand Abrahams as being fundamental in bringing that truth home quickly and easily, economically, to me—what was going on, and what had been going on for a long time in folklore.

MILLER: Right. Also, some of the concepts I've seen in some of his essays, including the one in *The Handbook of American Folklore* which comes just after yours, contain the anthropological concepts of holism and social cohesion, or social solidarity?

LEVINE: Yes.

MILLER: And I found these in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, of course, as being central themes. Did Abrahams have anything to do with you formulating these things, or is it something you came up with yourself?

LEVINE: My basic orientation to his book was a dual one. On the one hand I really, really respected his courage, and his insight. He was understanding—understanding the importance of getting this down the way it was said . . . and as I say, he had a great impact on me. I thought he was a great collector. I had a lot of trouble with his conceptions, what he did with the materials intellectually. I still have trouble with them. I don't know his African work, which I'm told is very different, or I guess he does Caribbean work too, doesn't he? I just knew his American black work, and in that book and the book that followed it—*Positively Black*—and in both books he stresses very hard the emasculation theme, that the men were emasculated by the women, etc., etc., the basic pathological theme, and I had a lot of trouble with those, so my reaction to the book was not one of unadorned admiration. Intellectually I had a lot of trouble with what he was doing with the materials, but a lot of admiration for the materials themselves and his insight in collecting them. So I guess at that time I thought of him more as a collector than I did as an interpreter.

MILLER: OK. Yeah. That's one of the things that I had questions about. It seems to me that *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* was a positive statement about how blacks view their own culture, and what you're getting at is that they had a very positive self-image despite the environmental circumstances.

LEVINE: Right.

MILLER: And that is certainly different from what Abrahams was saying. Now Alan Dundes in Berkeley, I know he probably helped you out a lot, when you were first getting into the field. . . . Did he have a particular influence in shaping your approach to your Afro-American book?

LEVINE: Well, he did, actually. I had sat on some committees with Alan . . . before I ever got interested in folklore, but when I got interested I understood that this was a guy I had to go see, and I did. He couldn't have been nicer, and more open and encouraging. And encouraging meant, "Sure, you can do it. Absolutely." I don't know if he pointed me in a specific direction in the beginning or gave me specific help, (but) he gave me an interesting conception which I think helped me a lot in the book and that's when we were talking one day and he said, "Look. If the stuff is in the culture in the 1930s, blacks didn't learn that from whites." So if it was there in the 1930s it was there in the 1830s. I mean where did they learn it between the 1830s and the 1930s? He was very encouraging in urging me to look at the stuff in the twentieth-century and ponder what its meaning was to nineteenth-century folklore. Like looking at songs recorded in the backwoods of Alabama, and the like in the Depression, when you had actual recordings made.

MILLER: When *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* first came out, Archie Green wrote an article, and he attached some visual stereotypes to it. Are you familiar with that article?

LEVINE: Yeah . . . I just want to say, I want to go back a minute and say that Alan was also enormously helpful: he read the book in its final form, he helped me get those motif index numbers, and he was just very generous with his time and knowledge. I just wanted to say that, as long as you brought his name up. He was a very, very active source.

MILLER: Yeah. That's what I've heard from a lot of different people, not just in relation to you, but for the field in general.

LEVINE: Yeah. He was very important . . . I do, I do remember Archie's piece.

MILLER: OK, and well, my quest-

LEVINE: John is helping him get that published into a book I understand.

MILLER: Who is?

LEVINE: John Vlach.

MILLER: Really? I hadn't heard about that. I'll have to ask John about that. But what Archie (Green) was saying is that you were using folklore to get at these sections of people in culture who had not been dealt with, the so-called "invisible" or "inarticulate." Did your background in the formal, traditional approaches at Columbia help you identify the lack of study in this area?

LEVINE: Well, you know, I wasn't conscious of any of this, it wasn't part of my ken. But let me say, there are lots of things I want to say about this very briefly. Dick Hofstadter, who alas didn't live to see any of this, died before I published the first piece. I would really have been pleased to have him see some of it, that is, my first piece on slave songs, which was published after Hofstadter's death, I think, or certainly around the time he died. But Dick Hofstadter had a great influence on me, because . . . in effect what he did was he wrote intellectual history, and whether one likes it or not, or whether it stands up or not is not important. He wrote intellectual history of Populists. You know. In other words what he was saying throughout his work, even though he wrote on anti-intellectualism, and I think misunderstood some of it, but throughout his work he was saying you can write intellectual history on anything. Nothing is beyond the pale for historians. Nothing is too low, nothing is beyond cultural importance or significance, so he studied the populist mind, which has generally been relegated to a nether world. "Who are these people?" But he took their ideas seriously. He studied them. A lot of people don't like the answers he gave out, but that's another question. But I think that had an enormous impact on me, without my knowing it, without consciously recognizing it. He encouraged me to work on Bryan, and to work on Bryan in ways that I later realized were also a kind of intellectual history. Even though he didn't like Bryan, didn't like Bryan's mind, I think Hofstadter basically thought—he didn't tell me what to do, he never told me what to do, which had a great impact on me too; he let his students do the thing they thought was

worth doing. But I realized that I was able to do that because he had done it, and later, when I began to take black songs, even though he never used those materials, and I don't know what he would have thought of it, the way I used them, but when I began to look at black materials, songs and jokes and anecdotes and proverbs as serious stuff, I realized that I had been shaped in part by Hofstadter's willingness to seriously study what was considered to be the . . . peripheral stuff, the marginal, of politics.

MILLER: Right. I was going to ask you about Dr. Hofstadter.

LEVINE: Well, I think he had a great impact in that way. A lot of people wouldn't have recognized that; I think that's forgotten about him. He had a lot of elitist notions about this and that, and worried about anti-intellectualism, and sometimes I think he missed the fact that what he called anti-intellectualism was often really a struggle for intellectual authority, and not always merely anti-intellectual. But that's another thing. The thing that I think is so interesting was his willingness to see any part of America as worth studying. And I think that his tolerance, his openness to the study, if not for the interpretation, had a great impact. I went into this innocently. Look: I was partly a creature of my time; we are after all, ourselves a part of our culture. I did the Bryan book; I wasn't dissatisfied with it, though I had some misgivings about how heavily I used Bryan to understand the people who followed him. And then I started a book on black protest thought. I started in a very traditional way, and spent years with boxes filled with notes that I've never used, though maybe intellectually I've used them, on DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White, right up to Stokely Carmichael. I was working my way through the leadership; I was doing the Bryan book again. Which is fine, some people do that all their lives—it was the same approach—I was trying to figure out black protest. Yet less and less, and this is by now the middle and late sixties, was I satisfied with this approach. It wasn't enough for me. You know what was going on in America in those years, and there was a lot of this. I wasn't a hybrid, I wasn't a "sport," but I was part of the culture, part of a certain generational part of the culture. And I began to worry about what I was doing, so I began to look for ways to test the representativeness of the leadership. The first way I found, to put this very succinctly, was migration patterns. And I began to look at those. Were blacks voting with their feet while their leadership were saying certain things? When the leadership was most angry and despairing, what were the

signs among the people? And so I looked at migration patterns, I looked at patterns of violence, I started to study race riots: how blacks acted in those, and how the race riots had patterned themselves. And then—very late in the game—folklore. And I was so naive about folklore in the beginning that I thought I could do one chapter in the book on it. But looking into folklore, well . . . it didn't turn out that way. I began to realize how rich the stuff was, was just entranced by it, and dismayed by how little I knew about it. Then I was asked to give a talk—I was given a whole session of my own at the 1969 American Historical Association. A friend of mine was head of the program committee, an older friend of mine, and he said, "Well, look. You're doing interesting stuff—," he knew that because I had spoken to him, not because I had written anything, "—why don't you give us a talk on twentieth-century black music? Or something like that. That'd be good. You can be the whole session. I said yes. It was a great opportunity. I was a young guy. And I began to write that piece, and I found myself going back and back, and I didn't realize what I had to do. But that piece, which took me a long time to write, that's the piece, "Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness," I started that as a twentieth-century music talk for the American Historical Association and I ended up writing a piece on slave songs. I kept asking questions which drove me further and further back into the folklore. And I wrote that piece and I think that was the turning point. After that piece I realized I was writing a book in which folklore was the basis and I threw the rest of it away.

MILLER: In many of your writings you seem to be getting at the idea that to become a historian is a developmental process. Not necessarily introspective, but one of growth. Do you see this more or less with your students, or are your students still open to this type of orientation?

LEVINE: My students are, more and more, the graduate as well as the undergraduate, easy to teach this kind of material to. They're more receptive, a lot of them love it—in the beginning you had to be very careful. If you showed films to a class they loved it, but since they were reflective of their own culture films weren't a serious thing. Teaching twentieth-century America, I had to do everything I could to make sure they understood that materials like film and comics were important, they were history. But I find less and less that it's necessary to do that. I teach a course every year on films, on films and American culture during the Great Depression. It's a little course,

a seminar, but kids come into that course with the right attitude, they watch the films seriously, and they're wonderful, wonderful in interpreting the films, many of whom have never been asked to interpret a visual thing before. But I don't find I have to wear away a cultural resistance to it. They are willing to accept the fact that a film is a kind of book, a kind of language, a kind of speech-act, if you like, I mean an expressive cultural act. They're good at it. I'm just amazed when we watch a film together and we turn the lights up, I'm amazed at the kind of things they see. But I'm very encouraged. I think the future . . . the future is secure. I mean this is a big change. Looking at the students I don't think . . . let me give you an example. If you're successful, or if you're part of a successful movement, you wipe out your own significance. And I think that's an interesting process. If I sat down with students today and said, "Look at my book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Do you know what the importance of that book is? It helped to show that African culture was important to Afro-American culture." These kids (would) look at me as if I'm some kind of cretin. 'Cause they take it for granted that that's true. So I think that one has to explain to them that twenty years ago, this was not understood by historians. I think the same thing would be true of the importance of these other kinds of expressive culture. And now we have to fight (for) their inclusion in the canon. I think the day will come, not too long from now, when people will wonder just what the hell we were talking about.

MILLER: In other words, the work of the New Social History has become part of the cultural baggage of people my age and younger.

LEVINE: Exactly. *Of course* they're part of our expressive culture; *of course* they're worth studying. But I still teach in an institution with an Art History department that pays no attention to the United States before 1945, very little attention anyway. That's true at Harvard, that's true in many places; I mean there is no nineteenth-century American art according to these people.

MILLER: Your latest book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, . . . from your perspective, is that a direct progression from work in Afro-American?

LEVINE: Yeah, I think so. It's a questioning on a different level of thought—look, I was moving from folk culture, which no one challenges, maybe people should challenge it, but what I found interesting about my book was it was not challenged intellectually by people who

said, "Who the hell are you? Who are you to say that these songs represent anyone or this or that. . . ." Everyone accepted it. "Yeah," they said, "he's working in folk culture." So in my head, folk culture has a kind of panache. It's interesting. If it existed in the folk culture, people are willing to accept it as reflective of the mind of that folk, right? But when I started to move from there to popular culture, as in a book I'm writing on the thirties, "American Popular Culture in the 1930s," or "Culture in the Great Depression," well, that's not so easy. And here people are constantly bugging you: "Why should you take an Irving Berlin song of the thirties and say it represents anything but Irving Berlin?" And I began to worry about cultural categories to begin with, and how we got them, and "Why is Berlin popular culture?" and "What is popular culture?" The genesis of these questions came about this way: While I was doing the book on black culture, I read scripts of minstrel shows and found that Shakespearean parody was very popular. I wondered how they could do parodies of Shakespeare if Shakespeare wasn't well known, and how could he have been well known, because these weren't educated people. That became a little project for me. I began pushing back into it, and discovered for myself that the hierarchy we have taken as a given was in fact an invention. It was itself a reflection of culture, which is something I should have understood, of course, but I didn't. And very few people do: that the hierarchy is not a given, it is a reflection of culture, and culture changes. It did not reflect the culture of most of the nineteenth century, it reflected the culture of the turn of the century. So these categories, these boxes, that we live with are a recent invention, many of them. And that's interesting. And it does have to do with the fact that there's a culture out there that cuts through all those boxes. I think for instance, I begin to see themes in the thirties, such as the theme of the fear of being alone, which cuts through Hemingway, and film, and song, and radio shows . . . it's there in the culture. And these are the things that interest me a lot.

MILLER: OK, great. Well, I've got just one last question, which is not particularly in your field, but it may elucidate a few things. In science, at a very basic level, the difference between observation and experimentation is, that in observation you draw a hypothesis after the fact. You're looking at all the data, and you draw some hypothesis based on that data. In experimentation you draw a hypothesis and then you try to prove it. Now, to apply this to scholarship it would be a question of whether you're approaching your material with a set

idea or if you are drawing your conclusions after the fact. Which would you say that you do?

LEVINE: Well, I think we all do both of these things. Scientists do too. When Copernicus said the Ptolemaic system of the cosmos was too complicated, saying that God would never have invented anything so complicated, he had to believe in a certain type of God. So from the beginning, ipso facto, he ruled out that kind of universe without any data at all. And I have no doubt at all that part of what I do is traced back to my conception, from the beginning, of humanity, that is it is not totally controllable; it is not totally plastic; it is not composed of sheep who march to and eat the green grass of someone else's pasture whenever that someone rings the right bell. That is, that people do think, and have dignity, despite all the horrors they might commit. That's my conception of humanity. It's a basic conception, and my history comes out of that. Now, if that's all, if I was just proving that in my history, I would be a lousy historian. But I hope there's more to it than that. I am a creature of the data, but I don't go into the data naked. I don't go into the data at the top of the (intellectual) life cycle; I go into the data with a conception. It's very, very important for us to understand what the conception is, so we can guard against it, as well as utilize it. I know what I'd like to find, and I am damned careful of not finding what I'd like to if the data tells me it's not there.

Note

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