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- 1 I venture to say that no academic discipline has been criticized more harshly in recent years than American Studies. The objection used to be over the discipline's lack of discipline. These days the complaint is over its lack of academic common sense. The condemnation of this "pariah of the United States higher-education establishment," as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* put it in 2014, comes from both insiders and outsiders. Consider the titles of these disapproving essays:

"The People's Republic of American Studies," Carlin Romano (2001) "Anti-American Studies," Alan Wolfe (2003)

"Believing in America," Leo Marx (2003)

"The Shame of the American Studies Association," Gary Kulik (2013)

"The Closing of the American Studies Association's Mind," Sharon Ann Musher (2013)

"The Decline of American Studies," Richard Pells (2016)

"American Studies: A Sad Tale of Academic Decline," Charles Kupfer (2016)

- 2 And now we have my colleague Simon Bronner's studied critique, "The Death of American Studies?" (2018), published lately in this journal.
- 3 Unfortunately, the gathering storm is warranted. What went wrong with an academic enterprise that formerly held great promise? What went wrong is that American Studies became notorious for its leftist politics rather than respected for its innovative and positive scholarship.
- 4 My advisor in graduate school told me that if I behaved professionally in the classroom, my students should not be able to guess my politics. I tried to follow his advice throughout my career. But there is no mystery about the politics of the American Studies Association, which claims to be the official face of the discipline. A movement whose name once signaled serious educational reform has been weaponized by radical academics for use in the culture wars. An organization that began by probing the nature of Americanism is now implicitly anti-American. Members who earlier suggested we study diversity now study almost nothing but diversity. They cover race, class, ethnicity, identity, and gender in all its permutations, but the mainstream of

American life is rarely touched on unless it is to be targeted. American national unity is unmentioned.

- 5 Prof. Bronner has provided us with an expert overview of the state of the field. His references are international as well as American, which is unusual. This is our most contemporary and experienced commentary on the state of American Studies and the ASA. I agree with his observations and complaints almost entirely, but on some points I would like to elaborate.
- 6 I agree with Prof. Bronner that American Studies ought to produce research that is more scientific, an approach that he and others would call “Americanistics.” My guess is that the term will be slow to catch on, and I further expect that few humanists will adopt a scientific approach to the field. And I would be surprised if many social scientists migrated to American Studies. I continue to believe that multidisciplinary approaches—using whatever methods fit the problem—can organize our research effectively. Better than that, multidisciplinary teams of researchers could work together on scholarly problems. That approach would be highly unusual in American Studies, which has typically relied on heroic intellectuals acting single-handedly. Still another approach would be to create multidisciplinary anthologies of our findings across a range of topics. The *American Quarterly Bibliography Issue* aimed to be that kind of publication, but higher authority shut it down. The AQ then began reprinting ASA presidential addresses, a dubious improvement. The *Encyclopedia of American Studies* was another effort at compiling scholarship, but that has been shut down, too. Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson’s doorstep of a book, *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation* (2008) is an impressive anthology that should serve American Studies well. Why not commission more such anthologies that can summarize the state of our knowledge of the USA and propose new work to be done? That would be a proper project for a reformed ASA.
- 7 I agree with Dr. Bronner that more ethnography would improve American Studies. A variant of ethnography is local history research, or microhistory, and a variant of that is biography, a mainstay of many disciplines. More of this kind of work should be encouraged and rewarded. We might even hope for a revival of national character research, the original mission of American Studies. The earliest work was provocative, and flawed, but the systematic data produced recently by social psychologists can transform our understanding of our typical traits and their distribution.
- 8 There are no villains named in Prof. Bronner’s essay, but there could be. I decline to identify them because he might have a list different from mine. In any case, the crisis in American Studies is not theoretical. It was deliberately planned and executed by academic saboteurs working for the ASA and the AQ.
- 9 A sense of “exhilaration” used to typify American Studies, Prof. Bronner writes. Nowadays I find exhilaration lacking at the national meetings, as they have become rallies for dissidents and pessimists, not showplaces of Whitmanesque openness. For this loss of exhilaration, I say damn their hides
- 10 In contrast, I have observed how Europeans take to American Studies. While I was a Fulbright professor at the University of Copenhagen, my Danish students every day proved to me their curiosity about my country. I have taken many Penn State Harrisburg students to a half-dozen American Studies conferences in Europe, and there we were always welcomed and stimulated. I have given papers on national character at more than a dozen American Studies conferences around Europe, and I had considerate

audiences every time. From these experiences I have concluded that the Europeans' scholarly perspective on the United States is usually a model of civility and sobriety, compared to radical Americans' harsh portrayals of their countrymen. That is a turnaround from Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that Americans displayed an "irritating patriotism." I challenge anyone to find any conventional patriotism in American Studies today.

- 11 Two incidents of American Studies in Europe I remember vividly. In Poland a young American professor was doing his best in his paper to scold his country's foreign policy. A much older Polish professor who had more relevant experience with international relations leaned toward me and whispered, "Doesn't he realize what he's saying?" In Germany I was giving a paper at a conference on religion in American culture. A German businessman, I learned, had paid all of the American participants' expenses. I approached him after the conference to thank him for his considerable kindness. He replied, "I wanted to show my gratitude for American generosity." Those two memories, although a small sample size, lead me to wonder if American Studies might be better off in your hands than in ours.

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- 13 I think that an American Studies curriculum using the theories and methods of the social sciences, particularly ethnography, could be productive and attractive. With all due respect for the provocative interpretations produced by the founders of American Studies using literary and popular texts, I prefer plain-spoken social science accompanied by comprehensible quantification. At the University of Pennsylvania, formerly the home to the American Studies Association and the *American Quarterly*, I watched Prof. Murray Murphey work magic (perhaps the wrong word) with rigorous statistical analysis and air-tight philosophical reasoning. The scholarly apparatus required for this work can be cumbersome, but its findings are less likely to be as politicized or as unverifiable as results in the humanities have become. The application of critical theory, for example, virtually assures interpretations that will be antagonistic to America. Such theory stacks the deck, and that is illegitimate in scholarship as well as card play.

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Michael Barton, Professor Emeritus of American Studies and Social Science at Penn State Harrisburg, received his Ph.D. in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania in 1974. He taught at Penn State for over four decades, where he was also Director of the Center for Pennsylvania Culture Studies. His teaching and writing deal with the experiences

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