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# THE LAST PROGRESSIVE HISTORIAN: WARREN SUSMAN AND AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY*

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*Colleagues hailed the Rutgers University historian Warren Susman as a pioneer in the field of cultural history and popular culture when he died in 1985 at the age of fifty-eight. Although well known, Susman had published just a handful of essays, a collection of which was published only the year before his death. Despite his reputation, this work was not widely reviewed and when it was, not uniformly positively. This essay explores the disjunction between his work and his reputation and, through an analysis of archival sources, including Susman's newly available personal papers, argues that Susman's importance lies less in his contributions to the field of cultural history than in his understanding of the relationship between historical work and the critical intellectual heritage of progressivism. The essay traces Susman's early professional career and historical work, including his unpublished doctoral study of expatriate intellectuals and his critical engagement with the legacy of the Progressive historians, and his mid-career efforts to join with other left scholars in establishing a new socialist party. Susman's career allows for the analysis and better understanding of the progressive tradition in historical scholarship, the changes in intellectual and cultural history in the 1960s, and the way historians have understood their role in social reform.*

In the midst of a "rousing comment" at a morning session of the Organization of American Historians meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 20 April 1985,

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Warren Susman collapsed from a heart attack; he died at the hospital shortly after noon. Though only fifty-eight, Susman had been in chronic poor health and suffered from heart disease. His attendance at the conference despite his physical condition testifies to the importance he ascribed to the traditions and institutions of academic life. Long a member of the history department at Rutgers University, Susman was widely known as a brilliant, creative, and impassioned student of American culture, a person whom Mary Furner thought the "conscience of the discipline." Perhaps for these reasons, he was a favorite of his students, one of whom fondly recalled his unorthodox texts, such as the *Wizard of Oz* and the Sears, Roebuck catalog. Susman tried to show, the student recalled, that "perhaps Mickey Mouse was as least as important as FDR."[1]

His friend and colleague Lloyd Gardner remembered Susman's ability to provoke fresh thinking by contradicting expectations. In a lecture on three trials in the 1920s, all of the "good guys" were turned "upside down": the state of Tennessee was right in the Scopes Trial, if you believed in local control of schools; Darrow was wrong in the Leopold and Loeb case if you believed in personal responsibility; and, between Sacco and Vanzetti, the one who believed in justice and the American way proved to be the more naive of the two.[2] In Susman's hyperbolic idiom, the film director John Ford did not simply possess a keen historical sensibility but was, in fact, "perhaps the most influential *historian* of the United States in the twentieth century." Thus, when seeking to convey the

[1] *In Memory of Warren I. Susman, 1927–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), 7, 11–12; Lloyd Gardner, "Warren I. Susman, Rutgers University, Dies at Annual Meeting," *OAH Newsletter*, 13/2 (1985), 6; Mary Furner, "Warren I. Susman (1927–1985)," *History at Northern* (Spring 1986), 11; Maria Fleming, "Popular, Dynamic, Rutgers History Professor Dies at 58," *Daily Targum*, 23 April 1985, 1. The latter three sources are available in the Obituaries Folder, Box 21, Warren I. Susman Papers, R-MC 118 (Special Collections and University Archives, Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ). The Susman Papers are only partially processed. The box and folder identifications provided reflect those in use in summer 2015. For evidence of Susman's chronic ill health, which dated to the 1950s, see Paul Buhle, "Tuning in Warren Susman," *Voice Literary Supplement* (April 1985), 20; Merle Curti to Susman, 10 April 1981, Merle Curti Correspondence, 1973–95 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers; Susman to Curti, 13 Oct. 1955, Folder 5, Box 40, Merle Eugene Curti Papers, MSS 24 (Library-Archives Division, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin); Curti to Susman, 13 Jan. 1968, Folder 25; Curti to Susman, 22 May 1955, 19 Oct. 1955, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers; Susman to Gates, 20 Sept. 1950, Folder 21, Box 22, Paul Wallace Gates Papers, #14-17-1403 (Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY); Susman to Christopher Lasch, [Dec. 1970], Folder 6, Box 3, Section 1: General Correspondence, Christopher Lasch Papers (Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York).

[2] Lloyd Gardner to Paul Murphy, e-mail, 30 Aug. 2013.

influence of popular culture, he delivered himself of the opinion that "Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt."[3]

Friends and colleagues were extravagant in their praise of Susman. Paul Buhle, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin a generation after Susman had taken his Ph.D. there, described him as the "unacknowledged magus of 20th century American history."[4] Alice Kessler-Harris, a former graduate student, considered him "one of the transformative minds of his generation."[5] The "magnitude" of his "impact," argued David Suisman, a younger scholar who maintains a website devoted to Susman's work, "was in inverse proportion to the quantity of his published output."[6] Gardner called him the most famous unpublished historian in the United States; many treasured Susman's *samizdat*—"unpublished articles, lectures and talks, letters, reports on manuscripts, napkins with notes from conversations in the coffee shops of convention hotels."[7] Susman considered himself a failure, having never published a major monograph. A volume of collected essays, most of which were previously published, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1984), appeared only the year before his death.

Robert Westbrook attributed his authority within the discipline to his long career as a teacher, not his essays, which were often difficult to find and, Westbrook admitted, frustrating due to the fact that "many of his interpretations stand naked of the evidence required to make them persuasive."[8] Susman's chosen form was

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3 Warren I. Susman, "Film and History: Artifact and Experience," *Film & History*, 15/2 (1985), 26–36, at 31, original emphasis; Richard Yeselson, "Sussing It Out," *Voice Literary Supplement* (April 1985), 21. See also Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), 212. Susman's opinion of the historical importance of Mickey Mouse is quoted from a prefatory note in *Culture as History* but it appeared to in a 1973 essay. Susman, *Culture as History*, 103, 197. For conservative umbrage at the remark see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York, 1994), 40; and George F. Will, "'New History': The Schoolmasters' Revenge," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1991, A19.

4 Buhle, "Tuning in Warren Susman," 20.

5 Alice Kessler-Harris, "From Warren Susman to Raymond Williams and Allen Ginsberg: Moving Towards a Future with Illusions," *European Contributions to American Studies*, 43 (1999), 129–41, at 129.

6 See David Suisman, "The Uncollected Warren Susman," at http://davidsuisman.net/?page_id=547. I am indebted to Suisman's invaluable bibliography for many of the sources consulted for this essay.

7 Lloyd Gardner to author, e-mail, 30 Aug. 2013; Robert B. Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History: The Legacy of Warren Susman," *Reviews in American History*, 13/4 (1985), 481–6, at 481.

8 Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History," 482.

the speculative essay marked by bold claims, erudition, and leaps of imagination. They teemed with illustrative examples and provocative ideas, often drawn from art, music, literature, and social theory as well as history. The cultural references were dense and dazzling, the tone authoritative and all-seeing. Evidence was not lacking, but absent was the careful and cautious sifting of evidence characteristic of the scholarly monograph. While Susman often discussed particular texts and writers, he rarely attributed decisive historical importance to any one text or idea. As Alan Brinkley pointed out in a review of *Culture as History*, Susman's predilection was for "broad generalizations on the basis of small fragments of evidence"; he would cite a text in support of a point but never explain why this particular historical artifact was more important than another.[9]

Susman made sweeping, imaginative claims about American culture (for example, he claimed that in the 1920s there was a "growing concern among writers, philosophers, and students of language about the relationship between language and reality"), which were made compelling by carefully chosen details (one "cannot help but link the enormous popularity of word games, especially of the crossword puzzle in the 1920s, with this increased fascination with the issue").[10] He was unlikely to make an argument for the importance of, say, pragmatism as an influential discourse. Rather, individual writings reflected a larger cultural trend or become important for their deployment or encoding of values or symbols, as when Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade becomes a prime example of the quasi-existentialist commitment to a "special code of belief and values" in the 1930s, or when a final scene of triumph over a pinball game in a William Saroyan play illuminates Susman's notion that games served as vital metaphorical devices in that decade.[11] Or individuals become symbols of the age, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alfred Adler, or Mickey Mouse; or they become "culture heroes," as in Susman's analysis of the 1920s through the lives of Bruce Barton, Henry Ford, and Babe Ruth.[12] Mickey Mouse exemplified the broad comedy of the humiliated hero, which in turn reflected the fear and shame characteristic of the flailing middle class in the 1930s, which in turn was central to Susman's revisionist assessment of the 1930s as ultimately a conservative decade. He became known as a pioneering student of popular culture.[13] Susman is most remembered for an essay entitled "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," a subtle reworking of David Riesman's social analysis from

9 Alan Brinkley, "Pop Goes America," *New Republic*, 1 April 1985, 36–8, at 38.

10 Susman, *Culture as History*, 110–11.

11 Ibid., 167, 163.

12 See Warren Susman, "Culture Heroes: Ford, Barton, Ruth," in *Culture as History*, Susman, 122–49.

13 Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History," 482

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the 1950s, in which Susman postulated a distinctive twentieth-century "culture of personality," which he made clear he embraced.[14] He was a cultural democrat, eschewing any snobbery about popular culture. His analysis of the culture of personality reflected his late conviction that the "culture of abundance" contained "utopian possibilities" in addition to its better-known capacities for vulgarity and repression.[15]

Susman was widely respected, even beloved, as a writer and teacher, but the qualities that accounted for this high regard—his depth of knowledge, range of reference, fertile historical imagination, "brilliance"—were matched by other qualities that undercut his professional success, including his predilection for the intuitive essay and his inability to write the "big book." He had a profound influence on many historians but his work did not fit well within the academic trends of his own day. He is revered, but his work bears little relation to what cultural history is today. Despite containing Susman's most influential essays on the cultural history of the 1920s (not a frivolous decade but a very serious one, in Susman's analysis) and the 1930s (much more conservative than appreciated), *Culture as History* was not widely reviewed and the reviews that appeared, notably ones by Brinkley and Jackson Lears, were critical.[16] How could his influence be so profound and yet his work be at odds with the profession as a whole? Though Susman pioneered the serious treatment of popular culture, his historical approach did not match that of the generation of historians who came of age in the 1960s. They focused on how power infiltrates daily lives; Susman was more

[14] Susman delivered the essay at the 1977 Wingspread Conference on New Directions in American Intellectual History and it was originally published in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), 212–26. For Susman's indebtedness to David Riesman see Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History," 484; and Brinkley, "Pop Goes America," 37. For the influence of the essay see James W. Cook and Lawrence B. Glickman, "Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History," in James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History* (Chicago, 2008), 3–57, at 50 n. 79, which declared the essay "foundational." For a critical appraisal of the essay see Andrew R. Heinze, "*Schizophrenia Americana*: Aliens, Alienists and the 'Personality Shift' of Twentieth-Century Culture," *American Quarterly*, 55/2 (2003), 227–56. Heinze argues at 227–32 that Susman's claim that a "culture of personality" superseded a "culture of character" by the early twentieth century is unsupported by evidence and finds, in particular, that he misinterpreted the work of Orison Swett Marden. See Susman, *Culture as History*, 279–80.

[15] Susman, *Culture as History*, xix–xx, xxix–xxx.

[16] See Brinkley, "Pop Goes America"; and Jackson Lears, "In the American Grain," *Nation*, 4 May 1985, 532–5. However, see also Michael Aaron Rockland, "Warren Susman," *American Quarterly*, 38/3 (1986), 494–5; Michael Denning, "Class and Culture: Reflections on the Work of Warren Susman," *Radical History Review*, 36 (1986), 110–13; and Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History," 481–6.

likely to make assertions about the governing themes of American culture as a whole. As social historians adopted postmodern theory and colonized cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s, Susman's impressionistic essays became even more out of fashion. His updating of Riesman's analysis of the postmodern self, because aptly suited to the social-constructivist assumptions of younger scholars, became his primary legacy.[17]

Susman's career stands as a peculiar monument to the persisting appeal of the form of mid-century cultural criticism even as the content has been discarded or repurposed. Susman did much of his most creative thinking about American culture and history in the 1950s and 1960s and used methods of cultural analysis firmly rooted in that era. His work advanced neither the radical imperative of telling history from the bottom up nor the explication of oppression as a function of cultural or discursive power. Rather he both historicized and articulated the intellectual project of left-leaning and reformist historians and cultural critics between the 1890s and 1930s and reflected their conviction that a shared historical understanding was a prerequisite for social change. Rather than contributing to the emergence of the New Cultural History, Susman did something rather like the opposite. He resisted New Left cultural politics, which he believed threatened the academy; retained a belief in an organic and holistic culture; and believed that historical scholarship was the necessary basis for the creation of a shared cultural consciousness and radical social reform.

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Born in upstate New York to a middle-class Jewish family (Susman's father owned a pharmacy in Rochester), Susman matriculated at Cornell University in 1944 and graduated five years later, his undergraduate career having been interrupted by one year of service In the army from 1945 to 1946.[18] Susman tried dramatic writing, music, and art but felt his best chance at making a contribution lay with history. His "high school ideal" had been Carl Becker, and he steeped himself in the work of Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington before entering Cornell.[19] Located about a hundred miles southeast of Rochester, Cornell was a logical choice for Susman geographically, but it was also the school where Becker

[17] See Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2008); and Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

[18] *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 6. Further details are available on a data sheet completed by Susman's dissertation adviser, Merle Curti, attached at the end of his dissertation. Warren Irving Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris: The Backgrounds of American Expatriation, 1920–1934" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

[19] Susman to Gates, 3 April 1950, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers. Susman's comment about Becker is in an undated letter from Susman to Gates that was included with a copy of

taught for much of his career. Susman just missed him; Becker died in 1945. At Cornell, Susman met James Weinstein, who claimed Susman as his best friend and, like Susman, became a historian and a socialist. They both worked on former vice president Henry A. Wallace's failed 1948 Progressive Party presidential bid.[20] Susman fondly recalled the Henry Wallace campaign, drives in Weinstein's car, the recordings of Walter Geiseking, a youthful romance, "and the poets and the Marxists and the controversies and the pizza at Joe's and the damn good talk from which I learned so much."[21]

Susman's undergraduate mentors were Paul W. Gates and Curtis P. Nettels. Gates wrote landmark volumes on American land policy and was a leading historian of the American West, having studied with Frederick Merk, a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. (Becker, too, had been a student of Turner.) A Democrat who served in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in the New Deal, Gates was also active in Henry Wallace's campaign, serving as treasurer of the New York Wallace for President Committee. Gates remembered Susman's "fantastically rapid rate of reading and assimilating that made it possible for him to do twice or three times the work required, carry seven courses and still have time to drop in and chin by the hour."[22] Nettels, who earned his graduate degrees at Wisconsin, was expert in colonial history and economic history, wrote influential histories of the money supply in the colonies, followed Charles Beard in applying class analysis to American history, and proudly claimed some credit for developing Keynesianism. Like Gates, he joined the Progressive Party campaign in 1948. Susman also came to know the leftist historian Lee Benson, who was a graduate student at Cornell and shared his interest in the progressive historians Turner and Beard. The author of debunking histories of the nineteenth-century Jacksonian and reform traditions, Benson became an ardent and controversial advocate of

a profile Susman had written of Gates for the *Cornell Daily Sun*. Susman to Gates, n.d., Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers. Susman, *Culture as History*, 4; *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 7, 18. (Minor typographical errors in Susman's letters have been corrected in quotations from his correspondence.)

[20] Paul Buhle, ed., *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia, 1990), 113–14; James Weinstein's work for Wallace is noted in his Wikipedia entry, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Weinstein. Susman's membership card in Students for Wallace, Cornell Chapter, is in Folder 34, Box 3, Susman Papers.

[21] Susman to Weinstein, 3 Oct. 1961, Weinstein Papers. Geiseking, a French German composer pianist who played classical and modernist works, had performed in Nazi-occupied France, which made him a subject of controversy when he attempted to perform in the United States in 1949. On Walter Geiseking see Aryeh Oron, "Walter Gieseking (Piano)," 2006, Bach Cantatas Website, at www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Gieseking-Walter.htm .

[22] Gates to Richard Schlatter, 25 Feb. 1960, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers.

social-scientific history—in fact, the "*enfant terrible* of the movement," according to Peter Novick.[23]

Susman admired another student of Turner, Merle Curti, and claimed to have read the preface to Curti's *The Growth of American Thought* (1943) repeatedly ("over and over to the point I could almost recite it verbatim"); it formed the conviction in him that he would someday study with Curti. *The Growth of American Thought* treated the capacity for intellectual life, in a Turnerian fashion, as an organic feature of national growth and the reflection of its democratization. The growing capacity of Americans to think for themselves was what made the country democratic. Curti categorized the subjects of intellectual history as, first, what is known about human nature, society, and the university at any given point; second, speculations or guesses about what is not yet known; and, finally, the values that guide human action. Significantly, he foregrounded a fourth subject, the institutions such as schools, colleges, libraries, the press, foundations, or research centers that provided the conditions for thought to occur; they are the "agencies of intellectual life." The book was, he declared, a "social history of American thought, and to some extent a socio-economic history of American thought."[24]

Susman's choice of the progressive bastion of Wisconsin for graduate school was in the cards: Gates knew Curti when they both were both in graduate school at Harvard in the 1920s; in the 1950s he worked with Curti to transform the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, challenging racial discrimination and democratizing the association's governance. Nettels had taught at the University of Wisconsin before joining the faculty at Cornell.[25] In 1949, Susman attained his youthful dream and began graduate studies in history at Wisconsin, enrolling in Curti's seminar. Beard, Parrington, and Turner were still revered at Wisconsin,

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[23] Susman, *Culture as History*, 4–5, 270; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream, The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 322–3. On Gates see the obituary in *Perspectives on History* (May 1999), American Historical Association webpage, at www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-1999/in-memoriam-paul-wallace-gates. On Nettels see Michael Kammen, "Curtis P. Nettels: American Scholar, 1898–1981," *History Teacher*, 16/3 (1983), 383–8; and John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), 186). On Lee Benson see his obituary in *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 50/4 (2012), 33; and Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 383.

[24] Susman to Curti, 15 Oct. 1954, Curti Papers; Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2nd edn (New York, 1951), v–vi.

[25] Warren Susman oral history interview with Ronald J. Grele, 20 Aug. 1983, 1-28, "Oral History—Columbia—Ron Grele" folder, Box 21, Susman Papers; David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago, 2009), 89–94.

comprising the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Wisconsin "god-head."[26] "This is certainly where I belong for now," Susman wrote Gates soon after arriving on campus. "The pictures on the wall, the tradition, the people … the constant reminder of Turner, Ely, Commons—yes, I feel at home."[27] Susman later remembered the sway that Beard held over the department ("Uncle Charlie") and noted that everybody in the department voted for Norman Thomas in 1948 and opposed Wallace.[28] There were many East Coast influences at Wisconsin, including an influx of Jewish students like Susman from New York and New Jersey. However, strains of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism existed within a fractious and political department.[29] Susman recalled the economist Selig Perlman inviting all new Jewish graduate students in history to tea and urging them to switch to economics or sociology because history was an Anglo-Saxon discipline closed to Jews.[30] Susman became active on a committee attempting to unseat Senator Joe McCarthy.[31]

Susman's historical approach and style owed much to Curti, a pioneering figure in American intellectual and cultural history and American studies; he lauded Curti's fine-grained writing—"every detail counts, every piece of evidence is directly related to his view of intellectual history."[32] As Conkin observed, Curti's approach to intellectual history consisted of "a wide sampling, and selective quoting and paraphrasing" of "cultural arbiters" like educators, journalists, critics, reformers, novelists, ministers, and philanthropists rather than analysis of complex systems of thought.[33] Although Susman always respected and even loved Curti, their relationship was not without friction. Used to spending hours talking with Gates in his office, Susman found the peripatetic Curti, who was on campus only two days a week, more distant. Curti wanted his seminar students to study the impact of Americans abroad, which dovetailed with his current research project on foreign-aid programs, but Susman led a mini-revolt, causing Curti to divide the seminar and lead a smaller group of students in the study of the 1920s.

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26 Susman to Gates, 14 Jan. 1950, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers.

27 Susman to Gates, 24 Oct. 1949, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers.

28 Susman oral history interview with Grele, 1-4, 1-9. David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 78, notes that a few Wisconsin faculty voted for Thomas.

29 Matthew Levin, *Cold War University: Madison and the New Left in the Sixties* (Madison, 2013), 8; Buhle, *History and the New Left*, 8; Paul K. Conkin, "Merle Curti," in Robert Allen Rutland, ed., *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the U.S.* (Columbia, 2000), 23–34, at 27.

30 Susman oral history interview with Grele, 1-31. See also Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 98, who notes Perlman's disgust with history because he felt they would not hire Jews.

31 Warren Susman, "The Smoking Room School of History," in Buhle, *History and the New Left*, 43–6, at 44–5. This essay is a written version of an interview conducted with Susman.

32 Susman to Merle Curti, "Thursday evening," [Feb. 1960], Curti Papers.

33 Conkin, "Merle Curti," 30, 32–3.

Though the smaller group's seminar was a success, Susman believed it rankled Curti. Moreover, he became convinced that his own criticisms of Curti made their way back to him, sometimes in distorted form. Wisconsin's Reconstruction and diplomatic historian, Howard K. Beale, befriended Susman, confiding his own criticisms of Curti but, Susman believed, also telling Curti things falsely attributed to Susman.[34]

Susman's strongest ties were with fellow graduate students, including William Appleman Williams, Herbert Gutman, William Preston, and Charles "Pete" Forcey. An avid smoker (another source of irritation with Curti, as Susman's habit kept him out of the office and so open to charges that he was slacking off as a research assistant), Susman fondly remembered the vigorous discussions that took place in the smoking room of the Wisconsin Historical Society with fellow graduate students. He jokingly referred to this group as the "Smoking Room School of American Historians," but it aroused resentment amongst others. The culmination of these various tensions occurred when Susman and some of his Smoking Room colleagues demanded that the preliminary exams for 1951 be voided on the grounds that Beale was unfairly aiding his students. Though Susman passed his exams and the group's demands were apparently ignored, their charges led to a break in relations with some faculty, including Beale, and to discipline for Susman (the precise nature of which is unclear, though he was given a huge teaching load in the fall, which he enjoyed). Curti later traced the strain in his relations with Susman to his pressuring Susman to take the preliminary exams.[35] In 1959, Susman wrote nostalgically to his fellow Smoking Room Historian Bill Preston about their outsider status: "all of us really refuse to play the game by the rules set up by a lot of impossible fools who know nothing of real scholarship or real love of learning." To Susman, the smoking room bull sessions allowed the young historians to "just be ourselves, no worry

[34] Details on Susman's conflicts with Curti and in the history department are contained in Susman's correspondence with Gates. See Susman to Gates, 24 Oct. 1949, 25 Nov. 1949, 30 Jan. 1950, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers; and, most particularly, a long letter, Susman to Gates, 20 April 1952, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers. Susman recalled his refusal to work on foreign-aid programs as a graduate student: "I wasn't going to do any of that shit." He was, he recalled, a "terrible, smart nosed kid." Susman oral history interview with Grele, 1-42. Responding to a student interested in studying Curti in 1956, Susman noted of Curti that "at no time was our relationship close." Susman to Barry K. Beyer, 10 Jan. 1956, Folder 25, Box 1, Susman Papers.

[35] See Susman, "Smoking Room School of History." For Curti's later regret over pressuring Susman to take the exam and making him think Curti was disappointed in him see Curti to Susman, 7 July 1979, Merle Curti Correspondence, 1973–95 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers. Charles Vevier wrote to Susman in 1954 that Curti was still "seriously hurt by the old difficulty involved in the prelim mess." Charles Vevier to Susman, 3 Jan. 1954, Folder 3, Box 13, Susman Papers.

about status, no competition between any of us," just a group of people sharing common interests and the delight of addressing challenging intellectual problems, "living the life of the mind without being stuffy and above all regarding what we were doing seriously, but without pretense, always able to make fun of ourselves or for that matter everything else . . . We had the great advantage of being alive and real."[36]

Susman settled on a study of expatriate intellectuals for his dissertation, "Pilgrimage to Paris: The Backgrounds of American Expatriation, 1920–1934," which he wrote in the spirit of Curti, which meant a social history of intellectuals with a strong emphasis on the agencies of intellectual life, paying particular attention to the conditions that made expatriation possible as well as the meaning of expatriation itself.[37] Susman explained why American intellectuals in the early twentieth century chose expatriation, what they felt they were accomplishing, why they chose Paris, and how they managed to do it. He rooted expatriation in the intellectual life of the United States in the years before World War I, explained the appeal of Paris (including a detailed analysis of the cost-effectiveness of expatriation), categorized the types of expatriate before and after the 1920s, defined the conditions that made expatriation possible, and analyzed the motives of the 1920s expatriates and the meanings they ascribed to their experience.[38] Among other topics, he provided an insightful discussion of African Americans in Paris in the 1920s, noting the peculiarities of their experience.[39] Susman had been influenced by the trend toward social-science history represented by Lee Benson. He declared to Curti that modern historians should have as part of their "equipment" knowledge of statistical method (though he admitted lacking it himself).[40] The entire ethos of Wisconsin in the 1950s, with its reverence for Beard and Turner, mandated rigor in methodology and research. Susman recalled Herbert Gutman's "very Madisonian" discovery of understudied historical resources, "a Beardian piling up of data and local study" in the spirit of Turner. Curti shared the impulse to dig deeply into quantitative data, spending much of the decade analyzing census data for a community study of a rural Wisconsin county.[41] Susman claimed to have dreamed up the idea of testing Turner's frontier thesis with a local study and to have found a county

[36] Susman to William Preston, 29 Jan. 1959, William Preston Correspondence, 1952–6, folder, Box 4, Susman Papers.

[37] Susman to Curti, 24 July 1956, Curti Papers.

[38] See Susman, "Pilgimage to Paris," 207–9, for a summary of key elements of Susman's argument.

[39] Ibid., 218–30.

[40] Susman to Curti, 11 July 1955.

[41] Susman, "Smoking Room School of History," 44

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with sufficient records, Trempealeau County. Curti had dispatched Susman to investigate the university's computer center and Susman suggested to Curti that he make use of the "IBM computer service" to tabulate and correlate data for his study using punch cards. He even did some punching of the cards.[42]

Susman's dissertation reflected this Wisconsin-style empiricism. Susman read widely, consulting numerous memoirs of expatriates, turn-of-the-century literary journals, and avant-garde "little magazines." He made a painstaking compilation of biographical data on a hundred prewar expatriate artists and 985 expatriates from the years 1920–34 (out of a total number that he estimated to be between three thousand and four thousand).[43] The biographical research allowed him, at one point, to catalogue a hundred different motives declared by American intellectuals for their expatriation.[44] More significant for his analysis, Susman discovered that the European editions of the *New York Herald* and *Chicago Tribune* contained extensive coverage of the "Young Intellectuals" living abroad, often publishing their writings and letters to the editor. He pored over these papers, reading every issue of both papers for specific periods of interest. He later claimed that his reading of three expatriate dailies, amounting to eight to ten hours of daily reading for almost six months, led him to create false memories. Not unlike the lead character in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011), Susman had moments of imagined communion with his subjects. He would later reminisce to his wife about events they had experienced only to have her remind him, "You just read about that. We really weren't there."[45] All told it was an effort up to rigorous Wisconsin standards.

Susman clearly wanted to focus on intellectuals as a class, an interest that only seemed to increase as he neared completion of the dissertation. He read Karl Mannheim's *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* in 1956, finding it helpful, and that fall focused his advanced course on the intellectual and cultural history of America from 1877 on the "whole problem of the intellectual in America."[46] He began to think the dissertation might be a step toward a larger study of this problem.[47] Susman discussed bohemianism, but he minimized its role in understanding expatriation. Rather, he focused on the way in which expatriate intellectuals made Paris into a place where they could refine their skills, sort

[42] Susman to Gates, 28 Jan. 1950, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers; Susman oral history interview with Grele, 1-23 to 1-25. See also Susman to Gates, 20 April 1952, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers.

[43] Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris," 79, 205, 321 n. 67.

[44] Ibid., 212.

[45] Ibid., 199–203; Susman, *Culture as History*, 269.

[46] Susman to Curti, 9 Dec. 1956, Curti Papers.

[47] Susman to Curti, 6 April 1956, 9 Dec. 1956 [Aug. 1957], Curti Papers.

out their relation to America, and craft a critical and vocational identity. Van Wyck Brooks and Ezra Pound became Susman's preferred spokesmen.[48] The expatriates may have felt compelled to exile themselves from America, but they retained their Americanness: "Exile made an American no less an American."[49] The expatriation of the 1920s became an episode in the history of reform-oriented social criticism, in contradistinction, Susman noted to Curti, to his committee member Frederick Hoffman's thesis that "expatriation was a strategy against puritanism."[50] It is an insight taken up recently by Brooke Blower, who depicted the troubled and conflict-ridden Paris the expatriates encountered as a place where Americans abroad were able to "rethink their sense of self, to forage for new insights, and to sharpen critiques that had seemed harder to articulate back home." Americans abroad in Paris gained a "clearer sense of themselves as Americans."[51]

Paris became a "laboratory of ideas and the arts," a place where writers and artists would be free of censorship, the single greatest need in the minds of a generation of writers and artists who felt stifled and ignored in the US.[52] This was Paris as a "place of communication," with salons, studios, cafés, and bookshops providing the venues and the little magazines, the tools for intellectual life. The lesson to American writers and artists was that "culture was somehow whole," that art could not be separated from other aspects of culture, that the nation was a "total culture" resulting from its art and various institutions, and that the artist's "positive responsibility" was to create a new American civilization.[53] The meaning of expatriation, for avant-garde intellectuals made famous by Malcolm Cowley, "was in fact a meaning which might very well lead to the end of expatriation as a cultural problem." Cowley's group "sought a way of once again integrating the artist and the intellectual into society by giving him new functions and responsibilities." Expatriation was no simple critique of America, Susman concluded, but rather "was essentially an attitude one held towards one's self as an individual, toward art, and toward society."[54]

The expatriate scene in Paris does not seem to have captured Susman's most deeply felt interests, however. Susman had pursued other ideas before settling on

48 Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris," 20–21.

49 Ibid., 43.

50 Susman to Curti, 4 Sept. 1957, Curti Papers.

51 Brooke L. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris* (New York, 2011), 13, 265.

52 Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris," 282, 115, also 286, 289. See also Warren I. Susman, "A Second Country: The Expatriate Image," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 3/2 (1961), 171–83.

53 Susman, "Pilgrimage to Paris," 284, 315, 353, 316–17.

54 Ibid., 317, 351.

this topic, casting about in the intellectual life of early twentieth-century America (making inquiries for a study of the philosopher Josiah Royce and corresponding with the poet Ezra Pound) and proposing studies on historical thinking and "The Middle West: Image and Reality (1890–1930)."[55] He displayed a strong predilection for a non-Curtian myth-and-symbol analysis of American culture, writing to Gates of the importance of "key symbols, essentially historical" that were important to intellectuals and publicists in the 1920s, which he identified as the Puritan, the Philistine, and the Pioneer. He intended to put together an anthology on the "Image of the Puritan" with Frederick Hoffman. He was "working privately" on the intellectuals' attack on the frontier and some of the key ideas associated with Turner's frontier thesis in the 1920s. In fact, he seems to have originally planned an analysis of the frontier idea as myth or symbol in the spirit of Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950). Despite encouragement from Curti and others, for various reasons, including time, available materials, and "personal difficulties here," he set the frontier topic aside.[56]

* * *

Though Susman successfully defended the dissertation in 1957, the actual writing of it had been an ordeal. Highly strung and insecure, Susman was painfully self-conscious about his slow progress writing the dissertation. He sometimes despaired of his future in the profession, despite his love for teaching and scholarship. From 1953, Susman held three full-time faculty positions, including a five-year stint at the teaching-intensive Reed College, which exhausted him. (Reed College in the 1950s fostered an incredible culture of meetings: In addition to individual paper conferences with students, Susman attended weekly two-hour staff meetings and an additional four-hour evening meeting every third week—"*No Kidding!*" he wrote to Bill Preston. He recounted one week's schedule, which included fourteen hours of faculty meetings. "Reed is a mad place—I mean really mad.") In addition to his teaching, Susman got caught up in the politics of the college, maneuvering for one of his Wisconsin mentors, Fred Harvey Harrington, to assume its presidency and joining in protests when three Reed faculty were

[55] See "Initial Plan for Thesis Project: Men and Social Forces: A Study in Historical Truth, 1880–1850," Folder 21, Box 3, Susman Papers. This may have been a proposal for his master's thesis. See also Susman to Curti, n.d., Folder 32, Box 3, Susman Papers, including two-page "The Middle West: Image and Reality (1890–1930)." For his interest in Josiah Royce see Ralph H. Gabriel to Susman, 27 Oct. 1950, Herbert W. Schneider to Susman, 31 Oct. 1950, and Ralph Barton Perry to Susman, 6 Nov. 1950, Folder 32, Box 3, Susman Papers. For correspondence with Pound see the letters contained in Folder 29, Box 2, Susman Papers.

[56] Susman to Gates, 2 May 1952, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers.

investigated on suspicion of being Communists as a result of a visit from the House Un-American Activities Committee chaired by Harold Velde in summer 1954. Originally receiving a one-year appointment at Reed, Susman stayed through 1958 and was eligible for tenure in his fifth year but failed to receive it.[57] He subsequently received one-year appointments at Cornell and Northwestern, but much of Susman's professional life in the 1950s was consumed by a hunt for a regular position, attendant with all the indignities and absurdities that entails. At an interview for a position at Princeton, the general sentiment, Susman reported to Curti, was that "all social and intellectual history was nothing but glorified literary history"; one member of the interviewing committee reminisced about the war and asked Susman with what unit he served, resulting in each member present regaling the others with talk of their outfits and war experiences. They had all been officers, Susman recalled; he had been a corporal. They then discussed golf, which Susman did not play.[58]

His fortunes began to change in early 1960. Susman delivered a well-received paper at the Modern Language Association before an audience of four hundred,

[57] The vicissitudes of Warren Susman's early career can be tracked in his letters to Merle Curti and his undergraduate adviser, Gates, with whom he stayed in close contact. For his despair at his academic future see Warren Susman to Curti, 9 Dec. 1957, 4 Jan. [1958], 26 Feb. 1958, Curti Papers. Susman indicated that he was up for tenure at Reed College in the 1957–8 academic year, his fifth at Reed, but there is no indication tenure was granted, and he accepted a one-year appointment at Cornell University. Susman to Curti, 27 Nov. 1957, Curti Papers. For Susman's original appointment see Susman to Curti and Fred Harrington, 13 June 1953, Curti Papers. On the Reed College workload see Susman to Curti, 30 Nov. 1953, Curti Papers; Susman to Gates, 1 April 1954, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers; and Susman to Preston and "Nonie," 16 Jan. 1953, William Preston Correspondence, 1953–94 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers. On the Velde Committee investigations see Susman to Curti, 10 July 1954, 15 Oct. 1954, Curti Papers; Susman to Gates, 21 Feb. 1955, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers; and Susman to Preston, 14 July 1954, William Preston Correspondence, 1953–94, folder, Box 4, Susman Papers. See also "Presidents of Reed: Duncan S. Ballantine," Reed College website, at www.reed.edu/president/reed_presidents/ballantine.html; and excerpt from chap. 18, "Un-American Activities," in "Comrades of the Quest: An Oral History of Reed College," on the Reed College website at http://comradesofthequest.org/excerpt_chapter18.html. On Susman's effort to land Fred Harvey Harrington the Reed presidency see Fred Harvey Harrington to Susman, 20 April 1956, Folder 16, Box 1 (originally labeled Box 9), Susman Papers; Susman to Curti [fall 1954], Curti Papers; Susman to Gates, 22 June 1956, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers.

[58] Susman to Curti, 13 March 1953. Susman later claimed that the real aim of the Princeton interview was to find a replacement for Eric Goldman, whom his colleagues felt obliged to replace with another Jewish scholar. In fact, Goldman remained at Princeton for the rest of his career. Susman oral history interview with Grele, 1-46 to 1-48. On Goldman's perception of anti-Semitism in the historical profession see Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 95; for Susman's sense that the profession preferred WASPs see ibid., 99–100.

which resulted in requests for publication. Moreover, he reported to Curti, Columbia University Press accepted his dissertation for publication after only six days of review; the response "floored" him, as the press was enthusiastic, anticipated few revisions, and expected a fall publication.[59] He continued his success with a paper at the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in the spring; he was so overwhelmed by the positive response he received that he was sometimes on the point of tears. Capping things off, Susman received a tenure-track job offer from Rutgers. Even discounting Susman's passionate nature, such a sudden change of fortunes unsurprisingly elicited strong emotions. "I felt once again that perhaps I belonged and would be accepted," he confided to Curti.[60]

Columbia University Press never published Susman's dissertation. Susman claimed he withdrew the manuscript, and it never appeared in print.[61] He was still promising to deliver the manuscript as late as 1963 and an editor at the press was still asking for it in 1964 ("but not if it kills you!"). What explains the failure remains unclear. Susman had felt the pressure to publish from the beginning of his graduate career at Wisconsin. He early fell into a pattern of self-lacerating criticism of his lack of productivity and the quality of the work he did produce.[62]

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59 Susman to Curti, 25 Jan. 1960, Susman to Curti [Feb. 1960], Susman to Curti, 27 Feb. 1960, Curti Papers; Susman to Preston, 6 April 1960, William Preston Correspondence, 1953–6 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers. Columbia University Press had begun the review before January 1960, when Robert J. Tilley reported that three reviews arrived, one enthusiastic (as Tilley was) and two feeling that the book did not build to a conclusive point. The enthusiastic review seems to have come from Susman's friend Charles Forcey; the publishing contract was finalized in April 1960. Robert J. Tilley to Susman, 21 Jan. 1960; Forcey to Susman, 4 Feb. 1960; Agreement to Publish, 12 April 1960, Columbia University Press, "Pilgrimage to Paris" folder, Box 14, Susman Papers.

60 Susman to Curti, 4 May 1960, Curti Papers.

61 *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 24. Richard Yeselson wrote that Susman pulled the manuscript "at the last moment because he wasn't satisfied with it." After what he considered a rude rejection of an article early in his career, Susman refused to send off more articles, only publishing pieces that were solicited. "I'm crazy. I've broken all the rules. I should be dead on the street somewhere. I tell my students not to do what I did," he declared. Yeselson, "Sussing It Out," 22.

62 See, for instance, Susman to Gates, 3 April 1950, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers, in which he accounts his first year of graduate school a failure, in part because he produced nothing. For examples of Susman's frequent bouts of anxiety, depression, and self-doubt see Susman to Curti, 29 April 1953, 20 Nov. 1953, 5 March 1955, 11 July 1955, 25 Sept. 1964. Curti Papers; and Susman to Weinstein, 16 Nov. 1961, Weinstein Papers. On Curti's expectations of publication see Susman to Gates, 20 April 1952, Folder 22, Box 22, Gates Papers. Curti early made his expectations clear to Susman, commenting that Wisconsin's reputation depended on its doctoral students publishing distinguished dissertations. Curti to Susman, 8 Dec. 1953, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers. Subsequently Curti's tone to Susman was consistently fatherly, encouraging, and supportive; see Curti to Susman, 8

He had planned optimistically to write his dissertation quickly in January 1953; however, the actual process became long and arduous (understandably, given his teaching load), with the dissertation only defended three and a half years later in October 1957.[63] Curti later remembered Susman laboring over the dissertation and holding on to it year after year (although Susman seems to have written it fiercely over the summer of 1957).[64] Curti never understood whether this delay was due to trepidation over his advisers' standards, an impulse to perfectionism, or insecurity.[65] At the time, Susman confessed that his difficulty was less the writing than a fear of submitting his work to criticism.[66] His difficulty accepting criticism was evident in his reaction to the rejection of his essay on Turner's frontier thesis by the *American Historical Review*, which the editors did not consider to be history. Furious and discouraged, Susman displayed a prickly sensitivity that compounded insecurity with arrogance. "Those who succeed these days are absolute traditionalists in all ways; since I can never be one of those perhaps I should look for something else," he wrote Curti, declaring he had "just about decided to stop trying to publish anything."[67] Gates, who evidently "drilled" him constantly on the issue during Susman's one-year appointment at Cornell University, provided a tough-minded assessment that seems apt: "Perfectionism

March 1955, May 22, 15 July 1955, Aug. 15, Dec.20, 1957, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers. Curti suggested at one point that Susman dictate the dissertation onto a record, which would be transcribed and corrected to create a first draft. Curti to Susman, 12 Dec. 1956, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers. In an encouraging letter written as Susman was finally making good progress on the dissertation, Curti urged Susman to focus on his scholarship: "to hell with the committees and college politics until this thing is finished." Curti to Susman, 15 Aug. 1957, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers. On the manuscript see the correspondence in Columbia University Press, "Pilgrimage to Paris" folder, Box 14, Susman Papers, particularly Susman to Robert J. Tilley, 25 April 1963, and Bernard Gronert to Susman, 23 April 1964.

63 Susman to Curti, 6 Jan. 1953, 1 Nov. 1957, Curti Papers.

64 Curti to Susman, Aug. 9, Aug. 20, Aug. 31, 12 Sept. 1957, Folder 26, Box 1, Susman Papers. Fred Harvey Harrington, an imposing and authoritative presence in the department, took Susman in hand in 1957, writing encouraging, directive, and practical letters to him on finishing. Susman seems to have completed the dissertation rather quickly in the summer of 1957. Fred Harvey Harrington to Susman, 24 Feb., 14 March, and 3 July 1957, Folder 16, Box 1 (formerly Box 9), Susman Papers. On Harrington see Brown, *Beyond the Frontier*, 132–3.

65 *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 24. For Curti's later awareness of Susman's insecurities and perfectionism see Curti to Susman, Merle Curti, 1973–95 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers.

66 Susman to Curti, Sept. 25 [1958] (the letter is erroneously dated 1959), Curti Papers.

67 Susman to Curti, 24 Oct. 1960, Curti Papers. The piece rejected seems to be "The Useless Past: American Intellectuals and the Frontier Thesis, 1910–1930," eventually published in the *Bucknell Review* and republished as "The Frontier Thesis and the American Intellectual" in *Culture as History*.

I generally associate with men of less talent than Susman has but this is his major disease."[68]

There may be a second and equally important explanation of why Susman pulled the manuscript: he had changed his mind about what he wanted to say. In fall 1961, Susman confided to James Weinstein that few were interested in the "kinds of things I do." "The kinds of things I can publish I am no longer satisfied with—a terrible problem which keeps my book (in part) from coming out because I simply feel I haven't done what ought to be done and because I believe I will be read as saying something I don't believe, etc." He refused to compromise: "I will not write what I am not interested in writing and I will not publish that in which I cannot believe."[69]

Susman drifted away from the social history of intellectuals toward the analysis of intellectuals as generators of myths, symbols, and images and of the role of history in social criticism. He became less interested in the material conditions and social environment that enable intellectual life and more in the idea systems and frames of reference by which people come to understand their world. "I'm fascinated increasing[ly] with the whole idea of the use of historical image as a key to an understanding of intellectual history," Susman wrote Curti in 1960. "My idea: history and philosophy of history has in a special sense functioned as an ideology in America."[70] It seems likely that over the 1950s, Susman's interests drifted away from Paris expatriates to a topic that engaged him more deeply—the intellectual project of left cultural critics in the early twentieth century, the progressive historical tradition, and the role of history in social change.

Susman worked out his ideas in a series of papers—one on the importance of history to cultural change delivered to the American Historical Association in December 1960 and published in the *American Quarterly* in 1964 as "History and the American Intellectual: The Uses of a Usable Past"; a second on the frontier thesis as both a usable and useless past, his successful Mississippi Valley Historical Association Paper of April 1960, which appeared in the *Bucknell Review* in 1963; and a third on the historical interpretation of Puritanism that appears to have been written at about the same time but only published in *Culture as History*.[71] Susman began with a distinction between myth and history taken from Benedetto Croce. Myth unifies society and is characteristic of traditional status

[68] Gates to George Adams, 13 March 1967, Folder 21, Box 22, Gates Papers. Gates, Susman declared, prodded him on his need to produce in almost every conversation. Susman to Curti, 1 Nov. 1958, Curti Papers.

[69] Susman to Weinstein, 16 Nov. 1961, Weinstein Papers.

[70] Susman to Curti, 4 May 1960, Curti Papers.

[71] Portions of this last work, which appeared as "Uses of the Puritan Past" in Susman, *Culture as History*, 39–49, are similar to ideas presented by Susman at the Columbia University Seminar on American Civilization in March 1961. Susman's papers contain two

societies; history enables philosophies of change and is characteristic of modern contract societies. Myths purport to explain everything; they may be utopian but are fundamentally static in impact. History rationalizes institutions and can be instrumental in change; it is dynamic and therefore ideological. Myth and history often impinge on each other: History can be put to mythic purposes; conversely, utopian promises can be made into ideology in an effort to make them real.[72]

The context for Susman's ruminations was controversies over the Beardian imperative to make history relevant to the solution of contemporary social problems derived from his conviction that every scholar necessarily writes out of a historically specific "frame of reference." Curti had used his 1952 American Historical Association presidential address to defend this type of history against the conservative Samuel Eliot Morison.[73] Susman signaled his agreement in a 1952 paper delivered to his fellow graduate students excoriating historians like Morison, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, and Allan Nevins as servants of Cold War power rather than critical intellectuals. They eagerly subsumed their work in national imperatives and, gallingly, attacked their left critics for being relativists, declaring the superiority of the "Whole Truth," even as, Susman pointed out, partiality of perspective meant that no account of the "whole of reality" was possible. Truths were partial and multiple; "history was likely to be rewritten by each generation in view of its own problems and 'frame of reference,'" Susman declared. "'Frame of reference' history suggested that we might not be able to discover the Whole Truth and that what is considered Right is only a socially conditioned value judgment, devoid of objective reality."[74]

"Frame of reference" history was progressive history, and the attacks on it informed Susman's consideration of myth and history. "Why does anybody bother to attack the past?" Susman asked the Columbia University Seminar on

stenographic reports of presentations he made to this seminar. See "University Seminar 429–430 (American Civilization), Minutes, Meeting of 14 March 1961," Folder 22, Box 1, Susman Papers.

72 Susman, *Culture as History*, 8–11.

73 On the importance of debates on relativism and the progressive historians' insistence that history is written from a "frame of reference" see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 251–64. On the imperative among proponents of the New History to make history relevant and their embrace of relativism as an ideal over objectivity, see Higham with Krieger and Gilbert, *History*, 105–31. Under Beard's influence, Curti chaired a committee of the Social Science Research Council that prepared *Theory and Practice in Historical Study* (1946), which declared that every written history is a product of a particular frame of reference, which may be countered by avoiding absolutes and recognizing preconceptions. Ibid., 130. Merle Curti, "The Democratic Theme in American Historical Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 39/1 (1952), 3–28, at 18–19.

74 Warren Susman, "The Historian's Task," in Buhle, *History and the New Left*, 275–84, at 277–8.

American Civilization in March 1961. "Because," he answered, "the past somehow justifies the present, and unless you attack the past you cannot move anybody to change the present."[75] His viewpoint had not changed by 1984. In the preface to Part I of *Culture as History*, he cited George Orwell on how control of the past allows control of the future; "if we want a new order of affairs, we must rewrite our history to justify it."[76] In his essay on intellectuals and the usable past, Susman focused on the interplay between myth and history in Puritan and frontier studies. Puritan intellectuals had buttressed their colony through historical accounts defined by Christian mythology, thus demonstrating the uses of mythologized history in early America. By contrast, in the nineteenth century, American intellectuals discovered that analytical history—history functioning as ideology—could be a "vehicle of intellectual and social influence and power."[77] The ultimate premise of the progressives, and of left cultural critics like Brooks who insisted on a "usable past," was that historical understandings were essential to the world views that shaped civilizations and propelled historical change. Between 1890 and 1940, Susman believed, reformist intellectuals rightly attached an "extraordinary importance" to controlling the past.[78] "Since current ideology is based on a particular view of the nature of the past, since present problems are frequently solved by reference to the way past experience dealt with similar problems, the control over the interpretation of the nature of the past becomes a burning cultural issue," Susman claimed.[79]

When mythical understandings can be supplanted by history, real change can occur. This was the significance of Turner. Today, Turner's frontier thesis, which posited a democratic American character as the product of the unique American environment and the continually receding frontier, is more a historiographical reference point than a live hypothesis. It has been superseded by more sophisticated accounts of democracy, studies of cultural pluralism and hybridization in the borderlands between societies, and the multiculturalist and anti-imperialist sensibilities of post-1960s historians. However, Susman found important lessons in Turner's achievement. The "genius of Turner was essentially a simple and yet vital one culturally," Susman wrote. "He took a major American myth and made from it effective history. He took a utopian set of attitudes and beliefs and made them ideologically effective for his own times." Turner achieved the rare trick of harnessing the utopian impulses of a myth in a compelling historical analysis and, in doing so, creating a "major tool

75 "University Seminar 429–430," 3.
76 Susman, *Culture as History*, 3.
77 Ibid., 12, 15.
78 Ibid., 7, 21.
79 Ibid., 18.

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for social analysis."[80] The nineteenth-century liberal–radical tradition, Susman told a Socialist Scholars' Conference in 1965, too often focused on self and not on the "Idea of Civilization," which was the concern for the institutions that structure and organize society and the economy; it ignored historical study and as a consequence was nostalgic and nonideological. "It cut itself off from possible uses of history and thereby from the chance to build an ideology."[81] Turner showed how to promote social action as opposed to accepting the Cold War status quo in a fit of Niebuhrian resignation at the "tragedy of the human condition."[82] Cold War apologists had retreated from history and declared an end of ideology, but pre-World War II progressives transmuted the tensions between history and myth into ideologies designed to regenerate civilization.[83] American culture between 1890 and 1940, Susman believed, "was based in large measure on a view of the importance of history in solving human problems on every level and on a firm commitment to the special role that the intellectual might develop for himself in a world in which he felt alien as critic of the official ideology and champion of the truer meanings of the nation."[84]

In his essay on the frontier thesis as both a "usable" and a "useless" past, Susman took up the early twentieth-century left manipulation of the Turnerian story of American development, examining what had become, by the 1910s, a critical disparagement of the pioneer (as prone to business practicality over culture, and conformist) and the Puritan (as repressive). Such attacks on the Puritan and pioneer heritage of America were so influential among literary and cultural critics before World War II that they saw the menacing troika of Puritan, Pioneer, and Philistine strangling every effort of American artists to create a more free, expressive, and individualistic culture. According to these intellectuals, the artist was systematically thwarted by the inherited prejudices that defined the middlebrow masses. The frontier that Turner assumed could be an analytical tool for progressive action had become for left intellectuals an impediment to cultural growth and thus useless. Susman perceived the rather high self-regard lurking beneath the intellectuals' continual protestations of their own irrelevance; "every intellectual," he argued, shared some idea of how history functions and some particular understanding of American history that formed the basis of their own social criticism. "Such useful pasts are the commonplaces of intellectual history

[80] Ibid., 17. Susman cited Lee Benson on the mythical nature of the frontier. Lee Benson, "The Historical Background of Turner's Frontier Essay," *Agricultural History*, 25 (April 1951), 59–82.

[81] Susman, *Culture as History*, 70, 66–70.

[82] Ibid., 17.

[83] Ibid., 22–4.

[84] Ibid., 22.

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and part of the *Weltanschauung* of intellectuals that the intellectual historian must examine."[85] Susman betrayed in himself a personal faith in the project of academic history and American criticism that tracked these views. For the intellectual, making a past that is usable usually entailed dispatching a past that had become useless.

* * *

In the 1960s, Susman was active in socialist conferences, participated in protests on campus, advised the editors of the influential *Studies on the Left*, and worked on creating a "Left Caucus" in the American Historical Association to defend against pressures on the university to be relevant, whether they came from the right or the left.[86] Speaking at a 1965 Rutgers teach-in at which his colleague Eugene Genovese called for a Viet Cong victory in Vietnam, Susman galvanized the audience with a speech against the war, pounding the lectern with his fist so hard he broke his watch. (The next day, the student newspaper noted a collection to buy Susman a new one.)[87] Susman scorned Cold War liberals and the consensus history they promoted, which he believed merely buttressed the Cold War state. He rejected Daniel Bell's end-of-ideology argument and tangled with him at a seminar in 1961, demanding to know why his "moral pronouncements" should be accepted. The end-of-ideology debate annoyed Susman "because the whole idea that ideology has somehow disappeared is simply the worst kind of cover for the persistence of the most vicious ideology of all—the one currently operative here."[88] Susman

[85] Ibid., 27.

[86] See "For a Left Caucus in the American Historical Association," Folder 13, Box 6, Series 1, William Appleman Williams Papers, Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon State University. The typescript document is included in a folder of correspondence with Susman and identified as "the work of Lasch, Susman, Genovese, etc." The authors declare a "special responsibility" as historians to combat the decay of the nation's social system.

[87] The anecdote is from Lloyd Gardner, shared in conversation, 10 June 2015. Leo Ribuffo provides an account of the sit-in, in which Susman's fist-pounding occurred when challenging a faculty defending his position by appealing to one of Susman's "favorite words, 'civilization.'" Susman demanded of his opponent, "How do you define it?" *In Memory of Warren Susman*, 32–3.

[88] Susman to Weinstein, 16 Nov. 1961, Weinstein Papers. In some ways, Susman shared the postcapitalist vision that Howard Brick has identified among left-leaning social scientists in the twentieth century who displaced social theories grounded on economics with ones built on a unified sociocultural analysis. Proponents of this vision conceptualized cultures and societies as functional wholes and developed a type of sociocultural analysis that self-consciously marginalized the economic sphere and, in a "shift away from economics," defined society and culture in noneconomic terms. Howard Brick,

read C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) when it came out (it posed "some fairly monumental problems for historians," he observed to Curti); Mills led a session of Susman's seminar at Cornell on the topic of the intellectual's role in America.[89] He lauded James Weinstein's manuscript on corporate liberalism for revealing how ideologically adept business was, creating an ideology based on corporate-driven rationalization and a technocratic "New Middle Class" that was comprehensive ("a whole view of social order") and immensely significant.[90]

Nevertheless, Susman became highly critical of New Left uses of history and attempts to mobilize the institutions of the profession against the Vietnam War. Faced with a generation of younger historians determined to use history to fashion new ideologies from a frame of reference different from his own, he saw an escapist absorption in the self and not a hardheaded attempt to grapple with the idea of civilization. Like other older left historians in the 1960s, including Genovese, Gutman, Weinstein, Staughton Lynd, Jesse Lemisch, Gabriel Kolko, and Christopher Lasch, Susman hoped both to rejuvenate the discipline with fresh and more critical historiographical approaches and to use history to promote social change, to, as Lasch urged, "pick up the thread of radical thought and action where it was broken" in the early twentieth century.[91] Unlike Lynd, Lemisch, and Howard Zinn, Susman stopped short of prioritizing political engagement over scholarship and came to be critical of the increasingly radical student left. He opposed efforts to politicize the American Historical Association and backed Genovese's effort to block Lynd's insurgent campaign for the presidency of the association at the 1969 meeting. Genovese labeled Lynd's backers "totalitarians" and screamed that the association must "put them down, put them down hard, and put them down once and for all."[92]

Susman joined an effort led by Weinstein, which included Genovese and other leftwing scholars, to create a new socialist party that would lay the groundwork for a decentralized, socialist political economy. William Appleman Williams joined the group, as did several Wisconsin historians (including Mari-Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, Martin J. Sklar, Ronald Radosh, and James Gilbert), Jesse Lemisch, David Horowitz, Ann Lane, Barbara and John Ehrenreich, Naomi Weisstein, and Saul Landau. Christopher Lasch joined as well. The group circulated planning

*Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, 2006), 6–14, 136.

89 Susman to Curti, 10 Aug. 1956, 10 Nov. 1958, Curti Papers.

90 Susman to Weinstein, n.d., Weinstein Papers. See Susman, *Culture as History*, 69.

91 Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1969), viii. On the distinctions between an older and younger cohort of left historians in the 1960s see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 418–20, 434.

92 Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 435.

documents, or "Pre-Party Papers," which contained strategies for organizing the new party, creating a "new culture," and formulating an alternative world view. Nothing came of the project and the group disbanded by May 1969; however, their premises echoed the project of the neo-Marxist historical Left in England at the time, led by E. P. Thompson, to make historical scholarship relevant and to bring radical theory, including Gramscian analysis, to bear in effective ways on social action.[93]

Weinstein's socialist party planning group anticipated the disintegration of corporate capitalism and believed that a revolution would only succeed if a "mass revolutionary consciousness" capable of formulating a socialist alternative were already in place.[94] The members of the group circulated various drafts of a document that defended the "disinterested pursuit of truth and knowledge" that was endangered in the corporate-oriented university and called for university intellectuals to create the counterhegemonic "autonomous and comprehensive world view" necessary for a new consciousness.[95] Ideas have priority; conceptualization comes before the ability to live a new life. The first task was to gain ideological hegemony over civil society—to create a nation of socialists.[96]

Even as the group project collapsed, Susman, who was ill and on leave, placed great importance on writing a left statement on universities and scholarship and creating a journal to develop the group's ideas. In October 1970, he wrote a pleading and revealing letter to a reticent and skeptical Lasch, asking him to intervene with Genovese to continue the project. He justified Genovese's effort to put down a genuine "intellectual threat" to the profession even as he disavowed Genovese's personal animosities and overreactions. Susman was critical of the "casual and careless nonsense" about the nature of history and its use by scholars like Zinn, Lynd, and Martin Duberman. ("I *do* want to put *them* down *intellectually*," he wrote, echoing Genovese's rhetoric.) He took the threat seriously because, "unfortunately," he believed in the "enormous consequences of ideas." A journal was necessary for a "new consciousness"; "*Consciousness is the key*," he stressed. Genovese wanted to create a journal like *Studies on the Left* and Gutman wanted one like the English historical journal *Past and Present*,

93 On the group see Ibid., 428–38; and Eric Miller, *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* (Grand Rapids, 2010), 141–51. See also the names on a draft of the planned statement attached to Mel [Rothenberg], Miles [Mogulescu], Naomi [Weisstein], and Jesse [Lemisch] to ?, July 26, Folder 10, Box 3, Susman Papers.

94 The quotations are taken from an untitled draft circulated by Weinstein in January 1968 and enclosed with Weinstein to Susman, 10 Jan. 1968, Folder 10, Box 3, Susman Papers. See Untitled Draft Planning Document for Socialist Party, 1.

95 Ibid., 6–7, 8.

96 Ibid., 16.

but Susman envisioned something that was neither scholarly nor political in any traditional way. It would have a distinct editorial position, but the articles would be about the "nature and purpose of knowledge, especially historical knowledge, about the nature of culture, about approaches to the study of man, proper and improper, about effective methods of analysis, about the key scholarly and cultural questions that ought to be investigated and why." The journal Susman envisioned, which was to look at what knowledge means and the ends to which it should be used, would be a political act and fulfill the responsibility of left intellectuals. It would create its own school. Susman compared their efforts to the work of Lewis Mumford, Vernon Parrington, and Charles and Mary Beard in 1926 and 1927.[97]

Susman eschewed any leadership role for himself. "I am perfectly aware that professionally I am a failure," he noted. He was thinking of leaving academia. "I have no reputation, no following, no role of any significance." While Genovese wanted him to edit the journal, he dismissed this idea as foolish. Rather, he believed that Lasch should lead the project because he had "special authority" in the universities and Genovese would listen to him (as he did not to Susman). "I suspect that scholarship, ideas, the university, the profession, historical study mean too much to me; I take them too seriously," he declared.[98] As it transpired, both Lasch and Genovese embraced Susman's vision and planned on Susman being the general editor of the new journal, which, however, never got off the ground.[99]

* * *

By the 1970s, theoretical trends in the profession were marginalizing Susman's approach to cultural history and challenging the type of bottom-up cultural analysis associated with E. P. Thompson. Thompson played the role for his generation of left scholars in the 1960s that Turner had played for the progressive historians. He provided a way to understand the past that would foster the possibility of change. By depicting lower-class artisans, craftsmen, and laborers as creative agents of their own future, working collectively and inventively to subvert the dominant institutions of power in their society, Thompson and the British Marxist historians broke through the obsessive materialism and rigid class analysis characteristic of radical scholarship.[100] However, as Geoff Eley observes, by the 1970s the "New Cultural History" was emerging as a challenge

97 Susman to Lasch, 5 Oct. 1970, Folder 1, Box 3, Lasch Papers, original emphasis.

98 Ibid.

99 Lasch to Susman, 26 Oct. 1970, Folder 32, Box 1 (formerly Box 9), Susman Papers.

100 See Eley, *A Crooked Line*, xiii, 5, 15–18, 49, 54–5; and Burke, *What Is Cultural History?*, 18.

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to neo-Marxist historians. The need to better connect ideology, politics, and the "ground of material life" led to new theories of cultural power.[101] With its emphasis on the importance of language in constructing reality and the diffusion of power throughout a variety of social actors and texts, recognizing the agency of both authors and audience, holistic conceptions of "uniformly well bounded and coherent" cultures came to seem historically inaccurate. Culture is not a pattern or world view; it is the fight for interpretive authority.[102] The terms in which Susman thought and wrote about culture seemed increasingly remote.

Despite his training as an empiricist at Wisconsin, Susman embraced the holistic tendencies of postwar intellectual history—the "American-mind" model of intellectual history (or the "intellectual history synthesis") that had defined the field of American studies as it emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and rapidly lost authority in the 1960s.[103] As social historians began to fill in the canvas of American history with the heterogeneous, distinctive, and multitudinous voices of previously marginalized groups, Susman deployed totalizing terms like *myth*, *symbol*, and *ideology* with gusto.[104] In his dissertation Susman had held out a

[101] Eley, *Crooked Line*, 95, 91–102, 110, 147.

[102] William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 157. On the New Cultural History generally see, in addition to Eley, *Crooked Line*; and Burke, *What Is Cultural History?*; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 152–74; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 90–107; Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History*, 37/1 (2003), 113–24; Robert Berkhofer Jr, "A New Context for a New American Studies?" *American Quarterly*, 41/4 (1989), 588–613, at 589–96; Cook and Glickman, "Twelve Propositions," 10–14, 18–37; Casey Nelson Blake, "Culturalist Approaches to Intellectual History," in Karen Halttunen, ed., *A Companion to American Cultural History* (New York, 2008), 383–95; David D. Hall, "Backwards to the Future: The Cultural Turn and the Wisdom of Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History*, 9/1 (2012), 171–84; Daniel Wickberg, "Heterosexual White Male: Some Recent Inversions in American Cultural History," *Journal of American History*, 92/1 (2005), 13–57; and Anthony Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 188–212.

[103] John Higham, "Introduction," in Higham and Conkin, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, xi–xlx, at xi–xii; Rush Welter, "Studying the National Mind," in ibid., 64–82, at 64, 77–8; Thomas Bender, "The Present and Future of American Intellectual History: An Introduction," *Modern Intellectual History*, 9/1 (2012), 149–56, at 149–50; Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly*, 31/3 (1979), 293–337, at 298, 306–8, 311–19, 332–3; Berkhofer, "A New Context for a New American Studies?", 588, 606 n. 1; Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987), 147–50; Grafton, *Worlds Made By Words*, 201; Cook and Glickman, "Twelve Propositions," 8–9, 21–2, 31–2.

[104] Susman disparaged the idea of a "spirit of an age" and national character as products of romantic confusion in a letter to John Higham, and even found the idea of a "climate of opinion" dubious. He meant that he was interested in the variety of perspectives operative

"whole" vision of American society, or a view of a "total culture," as a goal to which any reform-minded intellectual aspired. A "whole" vision of culture was an aspiration, a necessary premise for socialist reform and the opposite of a fragmenting individualism. It was a tendency he retained until the end of his career, writing in *Culture as History*, "I have tried to look beyond what is frequently isolated as high culture, popular culture, and folk culture and to see the tensions and contradictions of a larger cultural whole."[105] While acknowledging that various cultures existed, Susman continued to write in loose and holistic terms. In a 1985 essay, Susman cited approvingly Vico's conviction that antiquities reveal the "beliefs of the age" and the "common sense" of the people, and that the analysis of an age's words and images would allow historians to create a "morphology" of its "symbolic system."[106] He thought film might be analyzed in a very similar way, revealing the "symbolic system basic to the culture," "the fundamental patterns of belief," "the essence of a society, its style."[107] In *Culture as History*, he declared his unwillingness to distinguish high culture from popular culture or folk culture, believing instead that the cultural historian's focus must be on the "larger cultural whole."[108] Acclaimed by Paul Buhle as the avatar of the New Cultural History, Susman seemed immune to the allure of the academic trends of his time: the new, "bottom-up" social history of the 1960s and 1970s (when Alice Kessler-Harris decided to study wage-earning women, Susman, shaking his head, inquired, "When are you going to do something serious?") or its post-1970s sociocultural variant.[109]

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in a culture at any time. Culture was the product of the tensions between them. Despite this point, he still found culture unified, if only by the common problems to be solved. Moreover, he consistently spoke of a singular American culture. Susman to Higham, 8 Oct. 1960, Folder 43, Box 1, Susman Papers.

105 Susman, *Culture as History*, 102–3.

106 Vico, along with Benedetto Croce, was in a Continental tradition of historiography that imagined that cultural experience, as opposed to natural phenomena, constitutes a "second realm of knowledge" and that a nation, period, or culture must be explored from the inside with a humanistic method (*Geisteswissenschaften*) distinct from the scientific method. Alan Bullock, *The Humanistic Tradition in the West* (New York, 1985), 77, 167. Vico was a favorite of Susman. Susman, *Culture as History*, xxiv, 101, 290. For a lucid analysis of Vico's historical theory see Isaiah Berlin, "The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities," *Salmagundi*, 27 (Summer–Fall 1974), 22–36, at 28–9 for the particular application to Susman's cultural theory.

107 Susman, "Film and History," 26–7.

108 Susman, *Culture as History*, 103.

109 Buhle, "Tuning In Warren Susman," 20–1; Kessler-Harris, "From Warren Susman to Raymond Williams and Allen Ginsberg," 136.

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It is not difficult to find evidence of Susman's charisma and influence or the excitement he generated in his students with his brilliant lectures ("brilliant" was an adjective that he generously applied from early in his career to work he liked), his willingness to take things like popular film seriously, and the occasional burst of classroom singing.[110] Susman "taught many of us to take seriously musicals and situation comedies," remembered Leo Ribuffo, who had Susman as a teacher while an undergraduate at Rutgers. "Not only did he know *everything*, upperclassmen reported," Ribuffo recalled, "but he could talk about *anything* at a moment's notice, sometimes providing his own musical accompaniment."[111]

It may be that the give-and-take of conversation, the flexibility and openness of this type of exchange to new ideas and provocative hypotheses, best captured what Susman valued in academia and the life of the mind. The socialist journal he proposed to Lasch and Genovese in the late 1960s bears remarkable resemblance to an idle thought he shared with his former "Smoking Room School of History" friend Bill Preston in 1959. He imagined a new "more informal journal" that would be open to all scholars, whether credentialed with a Ph.D. or not, and focused on "matters of interpretation, new views, critical expositions of current approaches, issues of general interest in philosophy of history—a critical and never stuffy journal whose job it would be to keep us alive and give us an outlet for the kind of work we really want to do." He proposed a name for it: "*The Smoking Room Review*."[112] History, Susman wrote John Higham, is a "kind of social inquiry," concerned with the consequences of holding certain ideas, world views, attitudes, and values.[113] What went on in smoking room conversations and college classrooms was not only enjoyable, it was important. Knowledge of the past is often essential for identifying values for the future. Humans can be united by a common consciousness, by myth, which historians might use to foster social

[110] For references to Susman's excellence as a teacher see Rockland, "Warren Susman," 494; Westbrook, "Abundant Cultural History," 482; and *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 2–3, 10, 23–4, 28–33, 53. Susman asserted that he used the adjective "brilliant" sparingly. See Susman to Curti, 1 Nov. 1958, Curti Papers; and Susman to Weinstein, n.d., Weinstein Papers.

[111] *In Memory of Warren I. Susman*, 28–9, original emphasis. Ribuffo took Susman's course in American intellectual history in his junior year and loved it because it was, as he remembered, about "weirdos." Leo P. Ribuffo, "Confessions of an Accidental (or Perhaps Overdetermined) Historian," in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York, 1999), 153.

[112] Susman to Preston, 29 Jan. 1959, William Preston, 1953–94 folder, Box 4, Susman Papers.

[113] Susman to Higham, 8 Oct. 1960, Folder 43, Box 1, Susman Papers.

change. One could explain the imperial conquest of the continent as also the birth of American democracy and in doing so make the nation more democratic. Cultural myths were, as Kenneth Burke argued in the 1930s, the "social tools" by which to unite a nation, but historians show how to make change occur.[114]

[114] Susman, *Culture as History*, 160, 211.

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