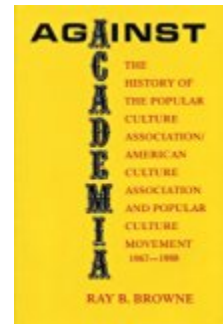


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ray Broadus Browne. *Against Academia: The History of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Movement 1967-1988*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87972-451-1; \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87972-452-8.

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One of the ways to study institutions is by tracing their growth and evolution from their origins. Somewhere back in the mists of time, I believe that C.H. Adams was a famous historian who did such things—the kinds of history which F. J. Turner was rebelling against in his famous essay on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893). There are always problems in such an approach, but there are virtues as well.

Back in 1989, Ray Browne wrote an history of our movement, a book which newcomers might wish to consult. The title is a bit confrontational, but here it is: *Against Academia: The History of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Movement, 1967-1988*. Many of us contributed bits and pieces to the effort, but Ray wove it all together into a portrait of the motives and actions of the early founders of our movement.

Chapter Three describes “The Development of the Popular Culture Association” in great detail. Ray Browne, Russel Nye (d. 1993), Marshall Fishwick, and John Cawelti founded the PCA because the American Studies Association seemed too fixated on “high culture.” With good humor, “these old goats” attempted “to revolutionize the whole concept of the Humanities in American schools” (p. 22). The first national meeting took place the next year in April of 1971 on the campus of Michigan State U—where Nye was a Distinguished Professor of English. The animus was very much against academia: “Popular Culture was to us was the everyday, the vernacular, the heritage and ways of life that we inherited from our predecessors, used and passed on to our descendants. It was the cultural environment we lived in... Pop-

ular Culture probably should not include some ten percent of so-called elite culture, but it should include all folk culture. It is by definition international and comparative in scope, with no time limit; it is not restricted to the present” (p. 24). Browne stresses the many agreements and disagreements among the pioneers, but does not miss the sense of excitement of those early meetings. Some of us miss the fictitious “Tollson Institute” and its cocktail parties where the joys of popular culture bubbled to the surface of our interaction. We had fun breaking away from the redundant studies of T.S. Eliot, choosing rather to consider the impact of popular art forms such as music, film, architecture.

Browne also chronicles the early problems with the National Endowment for the Humanities which thought of itself as a bastion of elite culture in a world of boors. One of the leading officers—alas, at my invitation—visited our annual meeting in Chicago and received a verbal tongue-lashing from our officers. (This antipathy may now be over since Sheldon Hackney’s friendly talk in Philadelphia at the 1995 national meeting where he described the study of popular culture as central to the humanities in a democracy—a true volte face for his institution.) Back in 1975, Ronald Berman—then the Director of the NEH—even refused to see a deputation of PCA officers! His successor, Joe Duffey was more hospitable, but grants were not forthcoming. (Here, again, we hope for a better future even in stressful times on Pennsylvania Avenue.)

Chapter Four narrates the “Birth and Development of the American Culture Association.” Once again, Ray Browne, Russ Nye, and Marshall Fishwick conducted a

survey to see if Americanists were happy with the work of the American Studies Association. Over 65% were not. Browne says the role of the journal and the organization to focus on items not covered by popular culture: “they would try to be more ‘serious,’ and surely would include studies that were hardly appropriate in the study of popular culture. As I saw the difference, an essay on the impact of *The New York Times* on American culture would belong in JAC, whereas an essay in the *New York Times* on some aspect of American culture might well go in JAC. An essay on Edward R. Murrow as conscience of America would belong to JAC, whereas a paper on Murrow’s success with the media would appropriately go in JPC” (p. 58). Joe Duffey’s remarks at his confirmation hearings, especially his promise “to promote learning in areas related to the understanding of our heritage as a people... our purpose as a nation” were particularly in tune with Browne’s goals and were published in the first issue of the new journal.

Chapter Five traces an history of the American Culture Association. Tom Towers—the veritable “tower of power”—suggested that the organizations meet together to round out the holistic study of American culture. Many colleagues joined us who would have been condemned at home for working with “pop culturists.” ASA gave them a special territory and a focus which lacked the emphasis on “mass culture” usually imputed to PCA scholarship. Topics such as The City, Science and Technology, Architecture, Interdisciplinary Methods prevailed in the early years. Browne describes the expansion of ACA to rival PCA in numbers as the years passed. In a pungent summary of the needs for ACA, Browne observes that “the Popular Culture Association is a philosophical statement. The American Culture Association is to a certain extent a political statement; it was created to satisfy and to appeal to a particular group of people” (p.

68).

*Against Academia* outlines the background of the two organizations and details the people who served as leaders and workers to make them viable institutions. Many of these same people have continued with the movement; generally, they are serious—but not humorless—people who want to see the fullest study of American culture and values. During some annual meetings, they will give papers on the PCA side of the fence; at other times, they will find themselves in the land of ACA. In either case, they know that they can explore new ideas and avenues—in some cases areas of study foreign to their training or teaching—before a supportive and friendly audience. What holds the two organizations together is the Mid-American spirit of democracy plus a special animus of cooperativeness which has transformed the study of American life over the last twenty-five years.

We do not always agree with what has happened during the history of the two groups, but those of us who have worked to make things happen stand back in wonder at the Dream—and the fulfillment. As Ray said to a group of us in Philadelphia during the 1995 national meeting, “Almost every book today is about popular culture.” Beneath the hyperbole is a truth and that truth is the end product of years of effort and faith by Ray and the other pioneers. Their story is described in detail by *Against Academia* and I recommend the book to newcomers.

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