

The American Jeremiad at 35



The State of the Americanist Field

The remarks collected here were offered on a roundtable at the 2013 Modern Language Association conference in Boston held to mark the thirty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Sacvan Bercovitch's influential 1978 study, *The American Jeremiad*. The charismatic power of Bercovitch's scholarship in the late 1970s and '80s is hard to overstate, although more recently (in the wake of the various turns in Americanist criticism toward multiculturalism, post-nationalism, transnationalism, post-exceptionalism, and so forth) it has been as often contested as not, faulted for its alleged focus on a narrow canon of American literature, for its national frame, and for what some see as its embrace of American exceptionalism, a term that has taken an unexpectedly prominent role in political discussion in the U.S. over the past two years.

The contributors to the roundtable were asked to address both the specific case of Bercovitch's *American Jeremiad* and, more generally, the state of the field of Americanist literary scholarship 35 years after the appearance of this influential and powerful interpretation of the "meaning of America," and in the wake of its 2012 reissue (with a new preface by the author) by the University of Wisconsin Press. The 35-year mark is not the only reason for a timely reconsideration of Bercovitch's scholarship and its legacy: his earlier book, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (originally published in 1975) was

also recently republished with a new preface by the author (Yale, 2011). Another occasion for this discussion was the 2011 publication of a rich collection of essays, gathered in Bercovitch's honor, *The Turn Around Religion in America: Literature, Culture, and the Work of Sacvan Bercovitch*, co-edited by two of the contributors here, Nan Goodman and Michael Kramer.

The contributors all brought to the roundtable an affiliation with Bercovitch of one kind or another. Along with their history of affiliation with Bercovitch, however, none of these scholars works in what might be called a specifically Bercovitchian mode. Some of them work on non-canonical literature, on ethnic literatures, on educational theory and practice, on queer cultural production, on popular or mass literature, in legal theory, feminism, and so forth. They bring to bear perspectives that are, while not diametrically at odds with Bercovitch's focus, nevertheless situated in an at once intimate and orthogonal relationship to it, and thus liable to provoke sympathetic yet critical reconsiderations of the place of *American Jeremiad* and of ambitiously synthesizing critical scholarship in our discipline today.

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