

Re-thinking American Studies for the 21st Century: A Critical Commentary

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In a deliciously polemical article published last year in *The New Republic*, sociologist Alan Wolfe tore into a spate of new books by “New Americanist” scholars debating the direction of American Studies. In the piece, entitled “The Difference between Hatred and Criticism,” Wolfe – a Boston University sociologist – accuses leading American Studies scholars of carrying the antifoundationalist assumptions of poststructuralism to the point of absurdity: defining away the object of their scorn, America itself. “Revealing America as non-existent,” Wolfe tells us, “is supposed to ease the task of those oppressed groups that are struggling to overcome its hegemony.” Citing various articles and talks, Wolfe reveals, and revels in, the spectacle of a coterie of bright, young scholars whose misplaced political agenda has led them to the brink of defining away the topical and even the physical boundaries of the very society they purport to be studying. Although one may well choose to take strong exception to Wolfe’s patriotism (Americanist scholars, he demands, should undertake a certain “responsibility” in depicting the USA and show a “willingness to convey both its possibilities and its pitfalls.”), he nonetheless succeeds admirably in calling into question the spirit of contemporary American Studies as practiced in the USA, and does us a service by suggesting that it is actually foreign programs of American Studies that are more representative of its true purpose – the study of the

United States.¹ Whether we agree with Wolfe's criticisms of the New Americanists or not, his article brings up some important questions – questions which were recently debated at the 2003 NAAS conference at Trondheim: What is the direction of American-based American Studies today? Is there a gap between American and European American Studies programs, and – if so – why? Finally, what should be the direction of American Studies in Scandinavia and Europe? I will offer some reflections of my own concerning these issues, before presenting some of the positions taken by scholars speaking during a roundtable debate that I chaired, entitled: “Re-thinking American Studies for the 21st century.”²

Genesis of the American Studies Movement

Never an academic discipline in its own right, American Studies is best characterized as an area studies, the boundaries of which were (and for the most part still are) defined by the object of study – the United States of America. In Europe, American Studies was established as a consequence of American geopolitical preeminence that followed the Second World War and was supported, first by private American foundations and later by the State Department as a part of a larger effort to hold together the western alliance during the Cold War.³ Most American Studies programs were attached to foreign language departments. By contrast in the United States, American Studies may be best understood as an intellectual movement, an expression of a critical cultural nationalism. Origin-

1. Alan Wolfe, “The Difference Between Criticism and Hatred: Anti-American Studies,” *The New Republic* February 10, 2003.

2. Position statements by all the participants of the roundtable debate follow the text of my essay in the form of an Appendix. I would like to credit Walter Mignolo for conceiving of the roundtable. My thanks also go to David Mauk for helping to organize the roundtable, to the American Embassy in Oslo, Norway, for funding the participation of several panelists from the Baltic countries, and to Danny Postel for helping me locate sources for this article.

3. Sigmund Skard, *Trans-Atlantica: Memoirs of a Norwegian Americanist* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget for The American Institute, 1978), 70, recalling his 1946 decision to press for the development of an independent American Institute, argued that “American civilization was no longer an appendage to Great Britain,” and that it was far too important in the world to be ignored. Skard, by the way, had had many doubts about American “vulgarity” and barbarism, but these, he tells us, were swept away by the (apparent) triumph of the New Deal in the 1930s.

nating in the 1930s (the seminal program at Harvard was established in 1937), American Studies followed in the footsteps of a tradition of essay writing by men of letters, beginning with the reports of European travelers in the 18th century and maturing with the work of a number of American-born cultural critics and critical public intellectuals – men such as Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Harold Stearns, Paul Rosenfeld, and Lewis Mumford.⁴ Indeed two of Mumford's early works – *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (1924) and *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture* (1926)⁵ – could be said to be the two founding texts of the American Studies movement, both in form and content. These works were synthetic: they characterized “American civilization”⁶ as a whole, often by bringing into relation what in the academy were disparate fields of inquiry. The studies also tended to work on a balance between criticism and celebration. The academic inheritors and amplifiers of this tradition of letters shared a commitment to uncover an American cultural inheritance that was democratic, pragmatic, creative. American Exceptionalism, it could be argued, was only a wrapping, an attempt to frame and present some important elements of a new and vital society. It was an idealized America, certainly, an expression of a Euro-American hope; but there was also a frank criticism of another side of American life – one so powerful that it moved Harold Stearns to dismiss what had become in his mind nothing more than “a business civilization.” Their stance of seeking a balance between hopeful optimism and biting criticism is nicely illustrated in this short passage from Paul Rosenfeld in an essay on Carl Sandburg: “The man respects and loves sincerely the rocks and rills and woods which Americans have always dimly wished to respect and love and not to exploit;

4. On the value and loss of the “public intellectual,” see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectual: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Van Wyck Brooks, “America’s Coming of Age,” in *Three Essays on America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1934; orig. pub., 1915); Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919); Harold Stearns, *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922); Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924).

5. Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1924); *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926).

6. At Harvard, the American Studies program was originally called “American Civilization.”

known they needed to, and never quite come to love and be good to.”⁷ It was indeed a lost America of love that they hoped to recover.

The subtlety of Rosenfeld’s position (and that of the first order academic Americanists) simply made no sense to a generation of young men and women coming to age in the 1960s and seeing America through the lens of the anti-racist and anti-war movements. What they saw in American Studies was its presumptive political complicity with American imperialism masquerading as a staid, consensus-oriented approach to American culture. In a recently published article in the *Boston Review*, Leo Marx, one of the best practitioners of the old American Studies, gives us as good a version as any of the received view of the change in the field: there was, as Marx humorously calls it, a “Great Divide” in American Studies. Before the divide (BD) American Studies was “holistic, affirmative, nationalistic.” It had been founded on a synthesis of literary and historical studies. Literary scholars were of the “myth and symbol” school; their investigations of mythic themes around the conception of a “virgin land” coincided with the consensus school of national historians: both contributed to the development of the idea of American Exceptionalism. Technique and objective combined to give a view of the USA as a “society and culture so nearly homogenous as to be free of significant sociocultural conflict.” But the 1960s changed all that. After the divide (AD) literary scholars shifted their attention to texts seen as representative of the unacknowledged voices of American culture, while AD social historians “turned their attention to concrete particulars – to the precise, close-up, empirical,” indeed to carrying out virtually ethnographic studies of particular shared identity groups.⁸

Marx does not join in this view of the great divide largely because he sees it as a fundamental misrepresentation of the first American Studies paradigm. The founding scholars (Henry Nash Smith, F.O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller and Daniel Boorstin) were themselves left-liberals who had combined their appreciation of American ideals and values with sharp criticism of the actually existing society. They were all critical of Ameri-

7. Rosenfeld, *Port of New York*, 67. It may well be that to be effective in reaching a wider audience and influencing on-going debate, a public intellectual in a democratic society must always seek the kind of tension Rosenfeld achieves in this statement.

8. Leo Marx, “Believing in America: An Intellectual Project and a National Ideal,” *Boston Review* at <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.6/marx.html>. Accessed 15 December 2003.

can capitalism, but they could still be relatively sympathetic to the United States because of their hopes for New Deal reformism. Even more fundamentally, these scholars lived in a world that, having faced down the real possibility of complete economic collapse, was soon confronted with the specter of fascism; consequently they felt grateful pride in the “egalitarian Enlightenment principles of the American Revolution” which, it seemed to them, had been instrumental in staving off the collapse of civilization.⁹ I think that Marx makes an important point here – though he is also missing something essential¹⁰ – and I want to come back to this issue briefly, but before I do it is important to carry the development of American Studies one step further toward the present.

The New Americanists & the Supplanting of the Second American Studies Paradigm

Like Leo Marx, virtually everyone acknowledges the development of the second American Studies paradigm – or the “the new American Studies.” But Jane Radway’s essay “What’s In a Name?” suggests that we have entered a third paradigm of American Studies, or, alternately, are approaching the fragmentation and death of the American Studies movement altogether.¹¹

For Radway the dominant poststructuralist discourse of what might be

9. Ibid.

10. What Leo Marx doesn’t fully acknowledge is that many contemporary scholars can never accept first school American Studies, regardless of the political instincts or real political positions of the people involved or indeed despite the actual existing alternatives of that era. The disagreement is more fundamental than that; it cannot be addressed by historicizing the old American Studies because in rejecting history (or at least the “old” history), these scholars have radically reconceived the relation between intellectual work and the social-political world. The old American Studies was neo-humanist. Like the Renaissance humanists, the first American Studies scholars had identified a set of foundational texts (canonical American literature and other high cultural productions) which were seen in relation to, but distinct from, the actually existing political and social institutions. In fact, they provided a useful commentary on those institutions. By contrast, poststructuralism, the reigning influence in today’s American Studies, is anti-humanist: foundational texts are understood to construct culture out of a binary logic which once exposed reveals underlying social structures of oppression. Consequently, the supposedly critical canonical texts are actually the sources of social oppression, in this view.

11. Jane Radway, “What’s in a Name?” in Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 45-75.

labeled the “New Americanists” (or trans-cultural American Studies) has already undermined the neo-liberal second order American Studies paradigm by questioning what the word “American” could possibly signify in an age of mass human migrations and declining national identities. The question is, why should the diversity of various cultures – originating all over the globe, migrating to North America, adapting to new conditions, creating various syncretistic cultural expressions – be expressed in the terms of a national entity – the United States?

This has led to a reassessment of the American Studies revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The American Studies that emerged after the “Great Divide” was clearly committed to the study of cultural diversity – though I would say that “diversity” was expressed almost entirely in terms of race and gender as opposed to the diversity of idea. American Studies (i.e. AD) was sharply influenced by the postcolonial politics of the 1960s Left. At the same time, American Studies scholars remained traditional Americanists in the sense that they saw the object of their study to be the United States, including the national political framework. There were both practical and theoretical underpinnings to this synthesis. Theoretically, American Studies embraced new departures in the study of specific social groups: this was particularly true as there was a rising social-science-influenced branch of American Studies rooted in ethnographic theory and headquartered at the University of Pennsylvania – which for a time hosted the *American Quarterly*. Practically, there was a strong commitment to a (neo)liberal reform program which linked the study of various identities of socially disadvantaged groups to concrete social programs aimed at bettering the conditions of life for these peoples – most particularly and increasingly through affirmative action programs. Specifically, AD American Studies developed a powerful politics of the academy as the field became a kind of umbrella organization for the organization of African-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican and Women’s Studies programs. The second order paradigm of American Studies, in summary, was an intellectual expression of liberal multiculturalism, and an attempt to make an ethical/political commitment to minority groups compatible with the study of national institutions and history. From this perspective, the present model of neo-liberal multiculturalism was the outcome of a long national process. Over time, I would argue, neo-liberalism has asserted its influence over the national agenda in two ways:

first, it involved a reassertion of the interest-group political model updated through affirmative action programs, effectively contributing its part to the reduction of American politics to backroom lobbying; second, it conducted a kind of rapprochement with “free market” neo-conservatism, whereby the model of identity creation is analogous to the creation of consumer-based identities – “an open marketplace of identities” replacing the traditional liberal “open marketplace of ideas.”

According to Radway, the dual-sided character of second order American Studies – its commitment to the study of culturally specific groups within the context of *the national society* – has made it unsustainable in the light of poststructuralist theory. Tying standard categories to the development of the American nation state has led to both the “essentializing” of group identities and to an unrealistic, or at the very least, to a highly contestable view of American polity as a progressive unfolding of American liberal promise. For radical New Americanists such as Radway, adherence to the multicultural liberal model has resulted in a loss of American Studies’ critical edge. Liberal multiculturalism’s promotion of the category of “minority group” and its focus on the issue of distribution of entitlements by the national state do not go far enough in freeing people from the oppressive traits attributed to “America.”

In promoting radical new ways of thinking about difference, poststructuralism has undermined liberal multiculturalism, opening the way for a broader critical appraisal of the entire idea within the context of American political and cultural life. For the New Americanists the disagreement is fundamental, beginning with liberal multiculturalism’s foundation: the idea that subaltern groups should be classified as “minorities” in relation to a majority society. The minority group concept – the key category of second paradigm American Studies – assumes relatively stable social identities. This stability is important because it is necessary to a reformist politics of identity which seeks to be inclusive – that is, to make space for minority groups within the framework of the larger national community, you must know who you are trying to include: social facts must be gathered. It is precisely for this reason that representatives of minority group organizations, such as the NAACP, lobbied vigorously against the move to include a new multiracial category on the U.S. Census form and other official documents that ask people to declare their race and gender. (The objection was that mixed-race people are not

counted in the U.S. government's statistical accounting of minorities.) Like the official racial and ethnic categories maintained by the U.S. government, the category "minority" rests on an essentialist definition of identity. Poststructuralist American Studies, by contrast, perceives identities to be inherently unstable, shifting "cross-cutting, insurgent, oftentimes oppositional identifications."¹² Identities can no longer be bound by essential characteristics of stable social groups, because culture "is the always shifting terrain on which multiple social groups form, actively solicit the identification of some, hinder that of others, and ignore the counter claims made by still others."¹³ Just as social identities lack stable meanings, so do they lack definite geographic boundaries: a culture, in this view, can no more be fixed and mapped than it can be described as a concrete thing. In part this idea reflects awareness of the realities of the early 21st century, a world in which human migrations across the globe have increased markedly, to near historic levels. But it also reflects the poststructuralist claim that all meanings are socially constructed and that geography, rather than being a particular space or "container" existing through time, must be seen as "spatially situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships that tie specific locales to particular histories."¹⁴ By far the most appealing framework for expressing this idea of social networks as the defining geographical principle is the notion of the borderland – a convenient metaphor for seeing all peoples through multiple cultural frames, resulting in a complex and rich understanding of various cultures. "Borderland" takes its name from real places, but it describes a cultural position akin to the older idea of "in-betweenness" (social marginality)¹⁵ – except that there are no inherently stable identities to be in-between. There is only a kaleidoscope of "multiple, shifting, imagined communities" in relation to which various identities are constructed.¹⁶ Such identities must of necessity be trans-national and trans-cultural, developing through the nexus of cultural contact, influence and contestation conducted through the forces of globalization, in particular through the global media.

12. *Ibid.*, 58-59.

13. *Ibid.*, 58.

14. *Ibid.*, 55.

15. I'm thinking of Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951).

16. Radway, 57.

Now, I should point out that though I am earnestly and faithfully rehearsing these ideas – even to the point of proceeding with deterministic-sounding statements about how “identities can no longer be thought of in old ways” – I don’t mean to be taken literally. Nor am I endorsing the poststructuralist ideas that stand in back of this discourse. Of course, we are free to re-imagine social identities, political formations and historical trajectories in multiple ways; at the same time we are restrained by actually existing social and political conditions, if we hope to accurately represent how such social identities take institutional form in the USA today. I think the writings of the New Americanists are important, not because I find them the best approach to the study of the United States, but because they have done some necessary work in opening up space for critical reassessments (as of liberal multiculturalism, for instance) and for a second reason as well. The New Americanists represent what I take to be the current state of the discourse in American Studies as expressed by its most vocal and persuasive practitioners today. In implying that this discourse has become hegemonic,¹⁷ Radway has accurately evaluated the direction of American Studies, and perhaps of the humanities as a whole, in the American academy, at least for the foreseeable future. It is important, in my view, to address this discourse – and not by simply reasserting positions that date back to the early 1970s, positions which have already been dismissed. One must contest (or engage) the New Americanists on the global turf, in terms of new spaces opened up by the dramatically changing cultural and political environment of our time. This involves examining assumptions about globalization and looking very carefully at related notions of trans-nationality.

The stakes are fairly obvious. At the most immediate level there is the question of the survival of American Studies itself. There is a neat (if somewhat simplistic) parallel between influence of the borderland concept on American Studies, on the one hand, and the globalization concept’s impact on the study of the politics of the nation-state. Globalization theories have challenged the assumptions about the locus of political power – seeing it operating in global networks of various sorts and questioning the ability of nation-states, or any entity based on a territorial conception, to explain or control events. In a similar way, the idea of

17. I realize “poststructuralist hegemony” could be said to be an oxymoron, but is it really?

trans-national cultural networks challenges the importance and truth of national identities, and national territories, to the people they are said to characterize.

American Studies & European Americanists: Responses at Trondheim, 2003

What we have described thus far is the state of American Studies discourse in the United States. But what is the situation for Americanists working outside the United States and how do these developments affect us?

For the most part, European and European-based Americanists have been second class citizens when it comes to American Studies – as has been commented on by many scholars, including Radway. Despite recent efforts to be more “inclusive,” a perusal of the Proceedings of the last ASA conference shows that European and other “International” Americanists are more often than not segregated into their own special programs.¹⁸

One possible response is to join forces with postmodern thinkers who advocate an unequivocally global focus and perspective. A case for the privileging of the global was made by University of Minnesota historian David Noble in his recent book, *Death of a Nation*. His point is that Anglo-Saxon Protestant American culture was always predatory and contradictory – ultimately a weak foundational culture, which in turn leads him to argue “that the modern nation [is] not the end of history and that the international marketplace [has become] a more important space.”¹⁹ The character of the global market is subject to sharp disagreement, but stating an unproblematic maximalist view of its influence – to the exclusion, or virtual exclusion, of the continuing importance of traditional conceptions of polity – is a key assumption on the part of the glob-

18. On the other hand, to be fair I must point out that in his 2002 inaugural address the new ASA president, Stephen Sumida, has called for a greater internationalization of ASA.

19. David W. Noble, *End of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 269.

alizers. The consequence for American Studies – its absorption into cultural studies – is made abundantly clear by Madina Tlostanova (Moscow):

In my view the most promising of all the models of the future American Studies are those based on the principles of trans-cultural, trans-national and in some cases trans-imperial elements, and thus on the study of imperial-colonial configurations – obviously not only of the Western Hemisphere, but of the whole Western modernity, as it is not possible to divide the history of the Americas and Europe. This would lead eventually to the blurring of the boundaries of American Studies, while the lacuna of the national will likely be taken by the global.

Tlostanova's position that American Studies should take on the assumptions of postcolonial studies assumes, as she puts it, the existence of a common "European and American 'community of fate' in the sense of the common logic of western modernity."²⁰

Even without interrogating her position from a theoretical perspective, one immediately comes up against an ingrained reluctance on the part of European-based Americanists to give up on the idea that the USA exists as an entity, that it has a national history and a national experience that, however complicated it may be, is real and alive. As Markku Henriksson (Helsinki) puts it,

there are a number of common elements in tastes, values, politics, economic behavior, etc., which set the people of the United States apart from people of other countries, states or whatever the political-economical-cultural formation or structure may be. Comparisons between the "USeans" and other peoples are important and fruitful, and this has often been the European approach to American Studies.

Henriksson's central point is empirical – that there are clear similarities of taste in the United States (regardless of how basic the common denominators may be) – and his commonsense-like observation that people who share a space are "a people" is, perhaps, very European in perspective, but still true enough in the experience of everyday life to be worth repeating.

Another important point that favors the continuance of the national approach rests on a bald, and these days an often rather uncomfortable reality of international power: the world is increasingly subject to the

20. See the Appendix at the end of the present essay for a more fully developed presentation of the ideas of the European scholars cited in the following pages.

exercise of American unilateral decision making, a point Raili Põldsaar (Tartu) makes clearly:

It would . . . be premature to abandon the study of the USA as a unified entity, the great "other" for most countries of the world. The contradictory ways in which "America" is conceptualized internationally, often simultaneously as a source of liberation and domination, and summoned in local public discourses, deserve greater attention from the American Studies community.

The point is that "America" as an entity exists still in the popular mind – and it is incumbent upon foreign-based Americanists to study how the societies perceive the United States and how "America" is used in the various discourses.²¹ Taking up the conceptions (and misconceptions) of "America" or "American culture" in various countries is something that only foreign-based Americanists are positioned to do. Thus the great advantage of foreign Americanists adheres to place: living somewhere outside the USA means we see American culture/cultures from the outside, but far more importantly, we can study the assumptions of American cultural forms and motifs as they take shape within the boundaries of other societies. This would gain further explanatory power, in my judgment, if such work were put in relation to the on-going cross-cultural work of historians and political scientists – who have been looking comparatively at political and social institutions in relation to the nation-state, and to both long-forgotten and emerging political forms as they compete to capture and reshape social identities and economic structures. This would enable us, for example, to look at different models for constructing a multicultural society, and at least be open to critical perspectives on the liberal model. Moving in this direction might invite some of us to take up the purpose and spirit of the original American Studies movement, in the one limited sense of granting creative expressions (literature, art, popular culture) insight into, rather than determinative power over social and political structures.²² This hope aside, obviously an international

21. I was reminded of this point by the way in which "the American system" of higher education was used and misused by both sides in the recent debate over the administration's reform program at the University of Oslo. See also Martin Alm, "America and the Future of Sweden: Americanization as Controlled Modernization," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 35:2 (Autumn 2003), 64-72.

22. In an area studies program there should be room for courses in the study of politics and society, geography, literature, art, popular culture and ideas – and for courses that provide various syntheses of these fields. Two practical difficulties in actuating this approach are pointed out by Richard Pells ("American Stu-

approach is quite different from studying a culture/society as a unique culture, as the original American Studies largely did.

In the context of American Studies today, perhaps the best way to hold onto the idea of national experience and to make it relevant to the situation today is to draw it out through a specifically *internationalist* perspective – in the literal sense that international means “among nations,” and along the lines of a useful theoretical distinction made by Paul Hirst between the global and the international conceptions of the world economy.²³ If societies are still to be understood in national terms – and through international perspectives – what are we to make of the undeniable growth of transnational cultural scenes and discourses – of everything from rap music to shared Norwegian ancestry? Kristin Solli (Iowa/Oslo) argues that the transnational dimension of culture need not abrogate the national:²⁴

I would like to see American Studies as a discipline in which national and transnational perspectives are not considered mutually exclusive. Quite on the contrary, if lived experience can be understood as multi-layered negotiations between national, subnational, and supranational loyalties and obligations, the national – as defined by U.S. geographic borders – is certainly a dimension that should still concern American Studies scholars.

Extending an international perspective on American Studies need not do away with transcultural approaches. However, it is important to see the transcultural in historical and political perspective. “Borderlands,” transcultural phenomena, cosmopolitan identities – formulations of cultural identities that extend beyond political borders – are not really new; they are important today, but it remains to be seen exactly how important they will become. In addition, a good case can be made for continuing to see culture in relation to territorial definitions of political entities (meaning

dies: On the Margins in Europe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 17, 2001), namely that most of the cross-cultural work involving North America is done by American historians, as European historians have been reluctant to study North America; at the same time, the overwhelming percentage of European-based Americanists are literary scholars.

23. See Paul Hirst, and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), 1-18.

24. Some “New Americanists” concur with this position. See William Spanos, “American Studies in the ‘Age of the World Picture,’” in Pease and Wiegman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies*, 387-415, especially 396.

bordered entities of some kind), for not only is the modern nation-state still extant, new polities are arising in the form of sub-national politics (cities and micro-regions) and super-national politics (sub-global regions). Many of these new political developments are most pronounced in Europe; the creating of a European region, for example, is a process that helps define European places and contributes to different and still emerging European senses of place that might well prove important points of departure for critical reassessments of the United States.

Appendix

Re-thinking American Studies for the 21st Century

Excerpts from a roundtable debate at the 2003 conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies in Trondheim, Norway:

Queries

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In the development of American Studies we have long since departed from the model of a dominant *culture* approachable through a common font of myths and symbols, and in its place substituted the idea of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has supplanted the notion of a unique American culture, but as the phrase “multicultural society” implies, multiculturalism has generally been seen as a pattern within the framework of (a single) American society. Thus the prevalent usage of the concept of multiculturalism assumes a common social framework rooted in the distinct, if not unique, institutional and political developments of the American federal state, as well as in the civic traditions of American society. But recently US-based scholars of American Studies have questioned this formulation and have raised the question of whether the political border should really matter so much to our study of “America.” Is the “American” in American Studies really necessary or is a national concept a hindrance to seeing cultural diversity for what is really is?

In a contribution to the recent book, *The Futures of American Studies*, John Carlos Rowe suggests a new approach to multiculturalism that shifts the emphasis from integration of diverse peoples into a single

American entity to a global context marked by the interaction of peoples. From this perspective, each distinctive, so-called "American," culture should be seen in relation to – and in interaction with – various cultural influences of an increasingly interconnected, "globalized" world:

... recent approaches have stressed the cultural hybridities that have occurred historically among the many different cultures constituting the United States. Attention to these hybridities requires scholars to look at the multiple cultural influences involved in important social formations; such cultural complexity is often invisible when historical changes are viewed primarily in terms of the assimilation of "minor" cultures to a "dominant" social system. (167-168)

The question we might address, then, is as follows: Are we – European scholars of American Studies – intellectually compelled to understand the American multicultural reality as a group of distinct and unique cultures which simply happen to be sharing a space erroneously called "America" and whose interconnections with cultures outside the borders of the USA are far more interesting and significant than what has become a largely mythical common US citizenship?

Walter Mignolo, Director, Center for Global Studies and the Humanities, Duke University, USA

At Duke University a two-year ad-hoc committee was appointed to explore the possibilities and write a proposal for the creation of a Center or Institute for American Studies. I was a member of the committee, although I am not an Americanist, in the strict sense of the word, by training. I have been, and I am concerned with the Americas, as continents that have in common their invention by European colonizers in the sixteenth century. It is a landmass also where the first wave of decolonization took place: the U.S. independence, 1776; the Tupac Amaru rebellions in 1781; the Haitian Revolution in 1804; and the South American independences between 1810 and 1831, approximately.

As a member of the above-mentioned committee, one of my interests was to understand what is at stake for those who make of the Americas a

domain of reflection, inquiry, intellectual and political concern, and to understand what is at stake in doing American Studies today after the end of the Cold War and the crisis of Area Studies. While Area Studies was a set of practices where U.S. scholars studied the rest of the world, American Studies was a set of practices in which U.S.-based scholars studied their own country and scholars based in other countries (Japan and Europe mainly) studied the U.S. What are the politics of inquiry that sustain the relationship between the domain of inquiry and the epistemic and experiential locales in which the scholar is based, particularly in view of the global significance of the U.S. after the end of the Cold War? What kind of projects could be envisioned that will put in conversation scholars doing American Studies in the U.S. and scholars practicing it in different locales? How would, for instance, configurations like Asian American studies, Latino/a studies, Native American and African American Studies fit? This question takes us beyond multiculturalism, which recognizes different cultures but studies them from a mono-epistemology, that of the European social sciences and the humanities. Can we think instead in terms of epistemic diversity, of a multi-epistemology? And if we can, how can we conceive “American Studies” of the future – as regulation or as emancipation?

Position Statements

Gunlög Fur, American Studies Program, University of Växjö, Sweden

As a relative newcomer to American Studies as a form of inquiry I see it from the perspective of my own main field: history. What strikes me then is that the study of American culture, history, and society is a study of modernity and the challenge of postmodernity. As “America” epitomizes – both in its own national rhetoric and in the perceptions of many observers in other parts of the world – democratic political ideals, individual freedom, and unparalleled economic development, it is a natural target for critical analyses of the ideas of the “modern.” In Sweden, a country in which for the greater part of the 20th century modernity has

been elevated to a secular religion, the inherent contradictions in modern democracies between ideals and real inequalities spark fundamentally moral debates. It is my observation that after a decade of market-driven concerns with individual self-improvement, many students today are influenced by a new wave of political consciousness, and with this awareness comes an interest in issues of equality and justice (and alternative ways of organizing society). Students are powerfully moved by and keenly interested in the areas of slavery and treatment of Native Americans, the Civil Rights struggle, and the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The role of the United States in the international arena also arouses considerable interest, heavily influenced by local political concerns. Because it brings these moral issues to the fore there is often a tension – felt strongly by the teacher at least – between feelings (individual likes and dislikes) and analysis. This quality of American Studies could make it ideal for interrogating fundamental issues of modernity in the local as well as global context, and it lends itself to discussions of form and content, objectivity and subjectivity, truth and vested interest – all vital concerns for any academic inquiry today.

Markku Henriksson, Renvall Institute, University of Helsinki, Finland

The United States is a complex society consisting of people of different cultural origins. In American Studies this has been acknowledged already for years, and current research, for example in Native American Studies, no longer sees the Indians as just victims but also as intelligent players. I believe this is true also with other so-called ethnic minorities. Several studies, however, have shown that there are a number of common elements in tastes, values, politics, economic behavior, etc., which set the people of the United States apart from people of other countries, states or whatever the political-economical-cultural formation or structure may be. Comparisons between the “USeans” and other peoples are important and fruitful, and this has often been the European approach to American Studies.

When looking at the present issues in American Studies, I think three things should be remembered:

- 1) Despite all the cultural and other differences, the United States, however, is a very European nation. By far most of the population has European ancestry, the political concept of the US is very European, its economics is based on European capitalism, etc. The United States may be a salad bowl, but (to paraphrase William Chafe) lettuce still dominates.
- 2) The political and economic culture(s) of the United States are and should be an important part of American Studies, particularly outside the United States. Our "USean" colleagues don't necessarily spend much time on this, but this may be the area where the consequences of United States behavior is most often felt abroad. This is also an area where the US seems to be more united than with its other cultural aspects.
- 3) Some "USean" scholars and former institutions of American Studies have recently moved to more general or global "Cultural Studies." This may be OK, but it may also reflect the (perhaps) particularly "USean" way of thinking, which considers all people and cultures the same way; this way of thinking may recognize the different aspects of the individual cultures but it believes in the universality of cultural development (including political and economic culture). There is a danger of great misunderstandings if "world cultural studies" is taught by using only "USean" material.

Kristin Solli, University of Iowa, USA

Over the last decade or so scholarly undertakings have increasingly pointed out ways in which cultures do not neatly match the territorial boundaries of nation-states. These studies prompt questions as to whether it is possible to draw geographic borders around cultures at all. Such arguments pose serious challenges to an academic order that rests on a framework that compartmentalizes cultures into nation-states and territorially circumscribed "areas." I find many of the studies that highlight the

problems of such a framework useful. They show how a rigid adherence to a national framework runs the risk of overlooking or deeming irrelevant experiences that do not fit our models of inquiry. Thus, I welcome many of the recent debates that interrogate what we as American Studies students and scholars take to be our object of study.

However, I would argue against a too quick dismissal of the power of "the national." While some scholars and commentators have already declared the nation-state a dying construct, there are in fact more nation-states today than ever before in history. On the one hand it might be true that the power of the nation-state as a global political and economic unit is declining; on the other, the emergence of transnational economic and political structures has made the nation-state increasingly important as a way for various cultural groups to resist such supranational formations. In other words, while the power of the nation is attenuated politically and economically, it is likely that cultural nationalism will remain a powerful force in the years to come.

I would like to see American Studies as a discipline in which national and transnational perspectives are not considered mutually exclusive. Quite on the contrary, if lived experience can be understood as multi-layered negotiations between national, subnational, and supranational loyalties and obligations, the national – as defined by U.S. geographic borders – is certainly a dimension that should still concern American Studies scholars. In fact, I think interrogations of the making, maintenance, and contestations of the national are some of the most interesting areas in which some of the social and cultural theory that is critical of the nation-state as the given unit of analysis could be put to use. Such investigations would not abandon the national, but see the nation-state as an object of critical analysis rather than a default framework within which our analyses are carried out.

Madina Tlostanova, Gorki Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia

In the time of globalization the obsolescence of national principles becomes obvious in the study of the Americas or multiple Europes alike. The development of diversity and difference models in US culture – from manifest destiny to neo-liberal multiculturalism – demonstrates a successive rejection of all nation-identifying elements: ethnic-racial, religious, cultural, and, finally, linguistic. The same way as celebration of multiplying difference *per se* does not lead anywhere, the refusal to see the difference between various Americas is not fruitful either. There also continues to exist a deep power asymmetry between US and non-US Americanists, which does not allow us to disregard the importance of US citizenship – a first class ticket into the world of globalization, because it still remains possible to effectively criticize American Studies only from within the US. What is important for non-US Americanists, then, is to question the ready-made epistemic constructs, created or naturalized in the US, such as the highly questionable and manipulative multicultural model or equivocal concept of nation, which is very different in Western Europe, Central Europe, peripheral Europe, the US and other American countries; and also try to use our particular positioning as an epistemic privilege. We would have to then deconstruct all such ready-made concepts from the position of outside of the Americas, which will naturally lead to redefined comparative elements in our studies. In my view the most promising of all the models of future American Studies are those based on the principles of trans-cultural, trans-national and in some cases trans-imperial elements, and thus on the study of imperial-colonial configurations – obviously not only of the Western Hemisphere, but of the whole Western modernity, as it is not possible to divide the history of the Americas and Europe. This would lead eventually to the blurring of the boundaries of American Studies, while the lacuna of the national will likely be taken by the global. In the future we will have a chorus of world American studies and the voices of European Americanists will have to be heard there too. But to do that the non-US Americanists have to be able to offer their own potential alternatives to the established scholarly models, instead of just passively reacting to the concepts born in the US – e.g. by deciding on whether we agree or not with neo-liberal multiculturalism. This positioning would have to take into account a European

and American "community of fate" in the sense of the common logic of western modernity, based on the complex interaction of local and global, instead of obsolete pretensions at questionable objectivity and disinterestedness of narrowly focused analysis.

Irena Ragaisiene, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

The study of multiculturalism within American studies has long focused attention on issues of nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and class, as well as their relation to the formation of ethnic and national identities, most often envisioned within patterns of interaction by diverse cultures constituting American society. The emphasis on the importance of recognition, legitimization, and celebration of cultural differences destabilizes a perception of American society in terms of a common American culture. However, the fact that American multiculturalism functions as a consensus-building device in American politics makes it an appealing object for academic investigations of national group interactions.

East European scholars may reconsider cultural diversity in the United States as significant against the backdrop of integration into the European Union. This issue was reflected on ten years ago by co-authors Estonian Priit Jarve and Lithuanian Kornelija Jurgaitiené as follows: "Here in Europe, we may be standing at the threshold of our own multiculturalism as a possible response to the imperatives of European integration."²⁵ Hopefully, formation of hierarchical positions in the overall context of European integration and globalization can be avoided. To that end fields examined in American studies that are oriented to the nonhierarchical nature of cultural heterogeneity, are especially valuable. When deliberating issues regarding the relevance of American multiculturalism to Europe, it cannot be assumed that the epistemological models of American Studies can readily be transplanted and adapted. This is in agreement

25. See Priit Jarve and Kornelija Jurgaitiené, "Radical Theory, Radical Teaching: Multiculturalism in American Universities," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 25:1 (Spring 1993), 49.

with Heiz Ickstadt, who has claimed: "Although the study of multiculturalism in Europe can profit immensely from a comparative approach and the expertise acquired in American studies, such studies as applied to one's own country cannot be done *as* American studies but require interdisciplinary cooperation."²⁶

All areas of "interdisciplinary cooperation," based on recontextualization, cannot be thus predetermined. Nonetheless, multiculturalism-centered discourses pertinent to Europe will unavoidably cast a fresh look at multiculturalism in the United States. Such an overlap of scholarly endeavors within American and European contexts is inevitably associated with transatlantic intersections, leading to multidimensional reconsiderations of cultural hybridities, definitions of the "global" and the "local," and their relationship(s) to the perception of the "national." A comparative interdisciplinary approach to the study of cultural diversity in Europe and the United States may serve to reconceptualize identity and place/space-related concepts, as well as encompass and contribute to the ongoing project of de-centering monolingually anglophone discourses in the United States. From such a perspective, a study of (American) multiculturalism within transnational/transatlantic contexts seems to offer promising developments in American studies.

Dr Marwan M. Obeidat, Department of English, The Hashemite University, Jordan

We (Arab Americanists) live in an unusual time. Teachers, practitioners, professors, and scholars of "English" all over the Arab World are nowadays embroiled in an angry controversy over various cultural, literary, and linguistic issues about American and British Studies, literary and otherwise, and about whether or not such studies should have any place in the study plans of the Arab-World universities at all. It will, for this reason, no longer do for Arab Americanists to dismiss such heated

26. Heiz Ickstadt, "American Studies in an Age of Globalization," *American Quarterly* 54 (December 2002), 555.

debates and controversies as hasty and over-reactionary. Rather, it would be fair to say that a large number of American Studies and/or American Literature practitioners are encountering a profoundly challenging array of complex responses and currents of thought (whether academic or cultural) that are beginning to materialize at many universities and academic institutions in the Arab World at large.

Of this confused and confusing situation, Americanist literary and cultural critics in our part of the world unfortunately have very little, if anything, to say; for alarm bells go off at the mention of the need to teach American Studies in departments of English as an independent field of academic study. Admittedly, we have allowed our fear at such a prospect to disable (if not cripple) our own scholarship. And we have done very little work of interest to defend ourselves and our field. We are, in English departments of the Arab World, rich in classes that foreground language/linguistics and British literature. But where is American Studies? Why is it so invisible? A question facing Arab Americanists at the turn of the twenty-first century is whether we really want to persist in evading the larger cultural and political concerns of American Studies simply because some of us continue to believe that its diverse issues may invalidate English as a subject of serious in-depth academic inquiry.

Raili Põldsaar, University of Tartu, Estonia

Multiculturalism has opened up new complex paths in understanding America and American identities, and American Studies has done a lot to trace the complex intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality and enrich academic enquiry with diverse interdisciplinary perspectives. In the excitement of the debates it is important, however, not to lose sight of the hegemonic America that exerts an immense influence on the economic, political and cultural developments at home as well as abroad. It is this America that most of the world encounters and responds to. The Estonian experience has shown that the features of America that are being adopted are not multiculturalism or feminism but, rather, concepts of economic and political neo-liberalism. It would thus be premature to

abandon the study of the USA as a unified entity, the great “other” for most countries of the world. The contradictory ways in which “America” is conceptualized internationally, often simultaneously as a source of liberation and domination, and summoned in local public discourses, deserve greater attention from the American Studies community. The USA exists in the world and is defined in a global context. The study of the negotiated meanings of “America” is thus socially relevant both outside and inside the USA.