Teaching American Studies
10.22439/asca.v56i2.7377

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TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES WITHIN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY (*IDÉHISTORIA*)

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Abstract: This article reflects on the author's experience of creating and teaching a set of courses with North American themes within the academic discipline of *idéhistoria*, intellectual history, at a Swedish university. It stresses the value of an *area studies* approach for training students in "a researcher's way to see and work" within this discipline. The more courses with themes from the US (and Canada) become "American studies," the better they contribute to prepare students to think about past thought in a way that defines the task of *idéhistoria* (in the author's opinion), namely a strictly contextualist approach. The article offers some examples of this. The fact that much about the US is familiar to Swedish students creates opportunities to understand past thought historically by exploring contexts that gradually make apparently familiar things less familiar, thus allowing them to be understood in unfamiliar ways. The courses have also become exercises in linguistic and cultural *translation* from American English, as a language that is fairly familiar to most Swedish students becomes more complex in their perception, with meanings and bearings shifting in time and space.

Keywords: contextualism, linguistic and cultural translation, area studies, Marshall McLuhan, W. E. B. Du Bois

An Americanist's special insights are rarely activated in teaching the basic course in intellectual history—*idéhistoria*—at Swedish universities, although the opportunities gradually increase as telescopic depictions of the "history of Western thought" approach our own time. Special courses at semi-advanced and advanced levels offer richer options in this regard. This article mirrors my experience of creating and teaching a whole set of such courses dealing with themes in North American thought. An underlying question is the following: can an *area studies* approach such as American studies add educational value in terms of training students in *particular* skills and perceptive habits that are essential to scholarly thinking within a discipline such as *idéhistoria*? Can it help students to learn "to think like a researcher" in such a field? My answer is yes, and I will try to show why. But first a few words about *idéhistoria*, which is an independent discipline with its own departments in Nordic academia, in contrast to most countries, including the US.

The term "history of ideas," the literal counterpart of "idéhistoria" in English, happened to become the label of a scholarly field with its own research agenda in the US soon after the discipline was established in Sweden in the early 1930s. The Baltimore philosopher Arthur Lovejoy crowned that process with founding the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940. In 1932, the literary history scholar Johan Nordström received a chair in *idé- och lärdomshistoria* at Uppsala University, immediately founding an organization and its yearbook, *Lychnos* (1936), the new discipline's counterpart of a journal. But "idéhistoria" in Sweden differed from "history of ideas," American style. Lovejoy's key approach was to follow supposedly eternal "unit ideas" through their successive combinations in the heads of thinkers through centuries, mainly by reading their texts. Nordström and his disciples were, on the contrary, strict *contextualists* in a non-theoretical way—at least in their approach to the "learned cultures" *in Sweden* which they focused on (in the first decades primarily by doing history of science). Past thought was supposed to be understood with empathy (*inlevelse*), by means of vivid descriptions of mundane situations in which intellectual activities took place.[1]

In certain ways, the Swedish tradition thus anticipated reactions against Lovejoy—and approaches similar to his—which, during the 1960s and 70s, turned "intellectual history" into a preferred label among most anglophone scholars doing *idéhistoria*. This alternative term had occurred among American historians and literary scholars at least since the turn of the century. In studying "ideas," many of them applied philosophical premises opposed to those of Lovejoy, who started as a critic of philosophical pragmatism. Often, they focused on intellectual traditions back home in the US rather than in Europe. The task of exploring "the American Mind" turned into a key part of the postwar field of American studies, aimed at cultural mobilization in the setting of the Cold War. Inspired by more critical ways to contextualize past thought in the 1960s (including Marxism), *US intellectual history* later took form as an academic field with networks of scholars in several disciplines.[2]

In my opinion, *all* academic teaching should help initiate students in the researcher's way of perceiving and interrogating a discipline's objects of study. Many of us who teach *idéhistoria* are eager to convey contextualist attitudes already at the basic level, despite the difficulties of doing so in broad overviews of "Western thought from ancient Greece to postmodernism." But in teaching more specific topics in courses at semi-advanced or advanced levels, it becomes easier to cultivate the students' sensitivity to the fundamentally *historical* nature of human thought.[3] At Södertörn University, Stockholm, I have had the opportunity to design a set of courses, taught in Swedish, but with reading assignments mainly

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or exclusively in English—all of them exercises in American studies within *idéhistoria*.

Initially, a series of semi-advanced courses titled "Reading Classics" opened opportunities to offer courses concerning specific key thinkers—twice each on Marshall McLuhan and W. E. B. Du Bois as well as on the "double classic" Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Whether or not *Canadian studies*—or area studies targeting other parts of *the Americas*—should be included in American studies may be a moot question. But the case of McLuhan clearly illustrates the futility of guarding such borders strictly, in particular when it comes to an area's intellectual history. Crossing borders enriched my McLuhan courses, as we dealt with contrasts and interactions between two parts of North America, two contexts, in a way, that proved to be mutually instructive.[4] For example, McLuhan began the kind of intellectual "probing" he would become known for while teaching literature in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 1940s. As his students showed no interest in high-brow novels and poetry, he began to apply his tools of literary analysis to stuff that did catch their interest: popular culture such as comics and advertising. The target of *The Mechanical Bride,* his pioneering high-brow analysis of popular culture published in New York 1951, was very much *American* culture, in the sense of commercialized expressions mainly formed and spread around the world by US society specifically. When he soon switched focus from *contents* of media culture to the human effects of shifting *technological forms* of media, he kept stressing that the strange new world he diagnosed was formed by US dominance, economically, technologically, and culturally. Thus, Canadians such as himself, geographically lumped along their southern border, were uniquely positioned to analyze a "Global Village" stunned by the "implosion" of electric media:

> Nature and history seem to have agreed to designate us in Canada for a corporate, artistic role. As the U.S.A. becomes a world environment through its resources, technology, and enterprises, Canada takes on the function of making that world environment perceptible to those who occupy it. Any environment tends to be imperceptible to its users and occupants except to the degree that counter-environments are created by the artist. A *New Yorker* cartoon a few months ago showed two fish that had climbed out on the shore. One said to the other, "This is where the action is." A wit has said we don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't a fish.[5]

An aspect pushing my other courses into a field within American studies that is comparatively central (by any definition) is that they have dealt with US thinkers and debates that consciously and explicitly grappled with questions concerning *the United States of America as such*—as either a contemporary social, cultural, and political reality, as a cluster of ideals, principles, promises, or visions for the future, or as a collective subject in history, deserving praise for its virtues and (perhaps more often) blame for its vices. Even more than McLuhan, these actors were *diagnosing* America, their own national context, as such.

Mead and Benedict offer a case in point. They purposefully challenged assumptions which in their day dominated the US completely. Their research provided ammunition for their roles as public intellectuals. Their mentor, Franz Boas, had turned anthropology from a branch of "racial science" into the foremost provider of scientific arguments *against* racism during the first half of the twentieth century. He had also shown a way to understand supposedly "primitive" societies by their own premises, without condescension—denying all claims by Anglo-Americans to leading any evolution of civilization or

being the standard of universally valid values. Expounding such a cultural relativism, Mead and Benedict phrased their studies of contrasting "patterns of culture" in a way that held up a mirror to their own society's face: assumptions and ways of living taken for granted among dominant groups were shown to be accidental products of history. Such patterns were possible to change. They *had to* be changed in order to cultivate all that was best in US society—in particular, if visions of democratic equality and individual freedom would in earnest be brought to include more than white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual men. Thus, in my students' hands, texts of Mead and Benedict tended to form a mirror of what was important and sensitive to people in the US of their day—and of controversies that would continue to be activated in peculiarly American ways later, for instance within the 1960s' countercultures and today's culture wars.

Something similar can be said about the other courses I have designed, also with source texts as the core part of the reading assignments, supposed to attain more of an historical meaning by means of context, provided by additional readings and classroom teaching. They do all to some extent deal with African American experience and "race problems" in the wake of racialized slavery. Few thinkers' intellectual efforts are better suited to mirror *America*—as a phenomenon, as an intellectual problem, and as a force in the world—than those of W. E. B. Du Bois. His "case" mirrors a uniquely long period as well, in a way that demanded selectivity in my courses. Through seven decades up to his death in 1963, he was the foremost intellectual exponent of Black America, and one of the most influential civil rights leaders ever.

But pedagogically, in *idéhistoria*, Du Bois has the paradoxical virtue of not being easy to pinpoint or to turn into simply a hero (or villain). This is partly due to the fact that he continually revised his positions and questions, in his personal manner. But his texts do also continuously remind readers of the presence of a historically *foreign* context, as it made him suddenly say things that don't fit with expectations among modern admirers. Students need to think in terms of initially confusing contexts. Another asset is Du Bois's unique way of shifting perspective and style in his writings, as he switched from the historian's and sociologist's analyses to the philosopher's and poet's attempts to catch abstract essentials, and to a very personal, often autobiographical way of approaching the issues he dealt with.

For example, Du Bois forced my students to see the so-called "Negro problem"—and problems with that notion—from different angles in a couple of texts written about the same time: the final chapter of the landmark social study *The Philadelphia Negro*, published 1899, and the essay from 1897 that would become the opening chapter in Du Bois's major classic *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. The first text summarized a host of empirical evidence and numbers, basically showing "the problem" to be a problem which Black people had with America—in different ways in different social strata within the Black community—rather than a problem that America had with people who happened to be Black. The other began a discussion that soon turned philosophical and historiographic (including the famous paragraph in which he passingly uses the term "double consciousness") on a very personal note, opening with Du Bois telling his readers what white people always seemed to have on the tip of their tongues but never dared to ask: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Students need to think: what could have been hoped to be achieved in the historical context by such different means?

In another intermediate-level course, titled "Black Thinkers in the Era of Legislated Segregation in the USA" (which will be taught again the

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fall of 2025), Du Bois's "case" was compared with a set of other Black voices from before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s including Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche. Some of those thinkers were addressed as "context" in the Du Bois courses as well. But by being treated as study objects in their own right, they mirror the Jim Crow era—and America as a problem—with increased complexity. On the other hand, what was gained in multiplicity of perspectives tended to be lost in depth. Bringing further factors into the picture made the contents harder to handle without richer background knowledge. Thanks to the corona pandemic, I was able to compensate for this with a whole set of prerecorded lectures, which would have been impossible in normal times.

Thus, it was interesting to compare pedagogical challenges, as I got the opportunity to simultaneously teach more or less the same course to doctoral students, through *Forskarskolan i historia*, based at Lund University. Their version extended the chronological range (including Black experience in the world of colonialism up to the Reconstruction era in the US) and individualized the reading assignments. The difficulties for PhD students were of course different, mainly due to richer background knowledge and study experience. But in one respect *the challenge* seemed surprisingly similar—and thus also the course's usefulness in terms of training students to perceive past thought as researchers in *idéhistoria*. There is a general pattern here.

On the surface, so much is familiar to Swedish students. The main chronology of US history is well known, mainly through the popular culture McLuhan attempted to probe. For ethnic Swedes, the US has also for generations been a relatively "close" country, especially due to the legacy of Swedish emigration.[6] The role of Black people in US history is also something that most students have a rough idea about: slavery, Civil War, segregation in the South, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s—as a background to the situation in recent years, with clashes around police violence targeting Blacks, etc. Added to such familiarity is the English language, which young Swedes today master better than previous generations. In my courses we are reading in the language of the historical actors we study, and the texts are rarely hard to comprehend linguistically. The task would have been radically different if my students had studied past eras in relatively unknown social worlds, where people were speaking Portuguese or Swahili, turning *all* course content into translations in several senses of the word.

But to a substantial degree, such familiarity is inadequate. More content than expected demands intellectual *work* in order to be understood in earnest. In intellectual history, the challenge is quite often to realize how much an apparently familiar context is actually strange and foreign. The challenge for Swedish students who are trying to understand Swedish contexts distanced in *time* is somewhat similar to attempts to understand contexts across the Atlantic from only a generation ago, or in our time. But superficial familiarity is also an asset, something to start with, a *Vorverstehen*. The task will then be to "get" how foreign the intellectual landscape actually is. In this sense, courses in US intellectual history provide better training in *idéhistoria* skills to the degree that they form exercises in *area studies*. This is particularly obvious concerning language. So many expressions and terms familiar to Swedes have a slightly but *significantly* different meaning in American English. In this respect, it has probably been useful in my courses to combine readings in English with seminar discussions in Swedish.

The seminars have often become exercises in translation. What does, e.g., the term "liberal"

mean in discussions among Progressive Era reformers, and how is that related to the non-European everyday meaning of the word in the US today? How can the word "race" be understood—in source texts and historiography—independently of what the term "ras" means in Swedish, both historically and in contemporary debates? In my most recent course, "Diversity and Democracy: The Philosophical Tradition of Cultural Pluralism in the USA," we discussed the African American philosopher Alain Locke's lectures on the meaning of "race" from 1915–16.[7] Taking his cue in particular from Franz Boas, he phrased what appears to be the first consistently modern, social-constructivist understanding of what "race" is—dismissing every vestige of biological content as sheer mythology. On the other hand, he embraced the *word* "race" (deploying a nuance in its semantic field strictly foreign to Swedish readers), expounding the value of creating self-assertive race-consciousness among Black Americans—thus outlining his agenda for the Harlem Renaissance (for which that agenda set the tone a decade later) in a surprisingly clear way. This offered a tough exercise in historical thinking for my students, but an eye-opening one as well, I believe.

Occasionally, though, ready-made translations are good, as they lower the threshold in reading assignments. While teaching this set of courses, I have produced a Swedish translation of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (soon to be published). The motive was my own experience: how hard this classic is to understand *in earnest* for non-native speakers. Using the result in teaching has offered an experiment. Students who read *Souls* only in English tended not to admit, or see, how much they actually missed. But the contents of our seminar discussions revealed it mercilessly. Reading in Swedish made a difference, as did the opportunity to discuss aspects of my translation work in the classroom.

The translated version was also useful for the master's level students in a course named "Historiography as Politics: Black Experience and the Truth about USA, 1619 until today" (which will be taught again in the spring of 2025). In this course, which applied a telescopic look at US history and the role of African Americans within it, with Trump-era wars concerning American identity and images of the past as a point of departure, Du Bois was not the main focus. (His analyses of the Reconstruction, confronting the "Lost Cause" mythologies both in their popular and scholarly versions, were important, but were just parts of the theme). But intellectual motives that lingered through his career—viewing US history in a global perspective, understanding slavery and its legacies as a part of more general patterns of colonial exploitation—have echoed between the lines in many of the recent discussions. Reading Du Bois's meditations on history in the first two chapters of *Souls* in Swedish, not needing to bother much about language, may thus have been useful in this context. But equally useful was probably the opportunity to discuss the charged nature of words, as we compared a Swedish rendition of the text with a long quote in English. A passage from the final pages of *Souls* is namely used to indicate a core message by Nikole Hannah-Jones at the end of the book version of the *1619 Project*, the *New York Times* initiative that was officially gainsaid by the first Trump administration in the *1776 Report* during its final days in January 2021.[8]

Finally: working with students to explore meanings by means of context in US intellectual history has offered rich opportunities of "learning by teaching." As the courses discussed here originated in my research interests—and were intended to train students in thinking like *idéhistoria* researchers—the interplay between teaching and research has become intense. At the start of the course on "Diversity and Democracy" in January 2024, the students were told that I just had

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received funding for a three-year research project with the contents of the course as a core theme. (Even the main title was the same. Other courses mentioned above also covered crucial parts of the research project's theme).[9] Thus, we got the chance to begin my project's explorations together, and I got the chance to ask my students for advice, as they became more fully initiated commentators than most. We explored the possibilities inherent in seeing things at a distance, helped by the fact that things are not extremely unfamiliar, but purposefully trying to make many things less familiar by means of particularly American contexts. Perhaps Canadians do understand the US better than most people, as McLuhan suggested. But with some effort, Swedes may also be suited to discover a bit of water across the Atlantic.

Notes

1. *Locus classicus* for Lovejoy's approach is the introduction to *The Great Chain of Being*, originally published in 1936 and based on lectures from 1933. Concerning the Swedish discipline, see Andersson and Björck, eds., *Idéhistoria i tiden.*

2. For early "intellectual history" in the US (including Lovejoy, who used the term in the subtitle of his journal) see Higham, "The Rise of American." For the context of early American studies, see Blaustein, *Nightmare Envy*. A main forum today is the Society for US Intellectual History: https://s-usih.org. For manifestations of the field, see e.g., Fox and Kloppenberg, eds., *A Companion to American Thought* and Isaac et al., *The Worlds of American*.

3. My own brand of militant contextualism has been elaborated in several publications, see in particular Östlund, "Ett manifest" and "Ludwik Fleck."

4. For my take on McLuhan, developed in teaching, see Östlund, "Tillbaka till framtiden?"

5. McLuhan, "Canada, the Borderline Case," 106. I used this quote as an epigraph in the course curriculum.

6. Blanck and Hjorthén, eds., *Swedish-American Borderlands.*

7. Locke, *Race Contacts.*

8. Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project*; The President's 1776 Advisory Commission, *The 1776 Report.*

9. https://maw.wallenberg.org/en/contentious-ideas-about-diversity-and-democracy-us-1915-1958

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