

BASIC QUESTIONS AND EARLY PATHS: AMERICAN STUDIES AS CULTURAL STUDIES

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Abstract: The current paper aims at contributing to the clarification of a number of positions in contemporary debates today, by focusing on the early stages of what would be called, on both sides of the Atlantic, American Studies and Cultural Studies. The text links significant issues, figures and orientations in areas of inquiry that have moved, along with the changing scholarly and social climate, from a reverential attitude toward canonical culture and the elite cultural heritage, reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s Victorian definitions of culture, toward a more critical and confrontational attitude to culture in the age of diversity, as illustrated in competing versions of Cultural Studies and American Studies.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, American Studies, Kulturwissenschaft, the Myth and Symbol School, Americanness

In many fields, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, but not only, a certain fuzziness of the terms and definitions employed may lead to confusion and even lack of good communication. Rather than ask such questions as “What is or what are Cultural Studies?,” one can find better ways of clarifying the coordinates of a communication situation, so that interlocutors can engage in a dialog, argue, challenge one another’s opinions and knowledge.

More specific questions might be, “What does Cultural Studies mean to you or to one particular specialist in the field?” What would be the necessary background information, including an acknowledged bibliography would also be worth considering. In the Romanian curriculum, for example, most practitioners in the realm of Cultural Studies consider that it has to do with cultural heritage, traditions, even traditional forms of history and archaeology. It is obvious that, in order to interact with people holding such views, the necessity of agreeing on an established bibliography, including scholars from various academic backgrounds, is more than essential.

Do we think, for example, that Culture Studies (i.e. *Kulturwissenschaft*) and Cultural Studies are synonymous labels to refer, in the same way, to cultural phenomena, practices, beliefs, institutions? Do we think that, invariably, American Studies is a subsidiary of Cultural Studies as an all-encompassing field? At various moments and places practitioners and scholars from these areas of inquiry would strongly disagree for very obvious reasons. One of the main reasons is that they mean different things at different moments in the development of their theoretical framework and of the object of their investigations. Culture meant something in the 19th century (see Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*¹) to an elitist intellectual, even in contemporary America if one asked a venerable scholar like Harold Bloom. It meant something else in the postwar age in the opinion of what we may call organic intellectuals advocating the importance of ordinary, working class culture, such as Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall. Is Cultural Studies descriptive and objective or involved and militant, advocating social change and challenging inequality, oppression, discrimination

¹ Culture, according to Arnold, is a ‘disinterested pursuit of perfection’(61).

in an age of multiculturalism and identity politics? Since the main aim in what is to follow is not necessarily to clarify what important specialists have meant and mean by Cultural Studies, one short statement, inevitably a somewhat distorting generalization will be made here before proceeding any further: over the last few decades, large numbers of scholars in American Studies have drawn upon the theoretical resources offered by British Cultural Studies and such predecessors as Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) and ultimately Karl Marx himself, whether in reverential or in confrontational manners. However, even earlier developments are to be examined in order to see how various scholarly itineraries have led to the main trends defining American Studies and Cultural Studies today and their complex relationships.

American Studies is an interdisciplinary field of research, having to do, today, with the study of American cultures, rather than culture.² Various names compete for dominance in this area of inquiry, and as more and more fields of investigation attach, quite justifiably, the adjective critical to their institutional denomination, one of them is Critical American Studies. As such, its approaches and ideological trends tend to overlap, and even coincide with those of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies has not felt the need to attach the word critical to its name, since its professed objectives have been critical and revolutionary from the very beginning of its institutionalization, initially as a form of left culturalism, at Birmingham University in the mid 1960s³.

Since any field of research has a history, displaying a narrative of significant beginnings, major actors, events and developments, defining American Studies in absolute terms is not possible, any provisional definition having to be historically contextualized. The aspect worth clarifying here is American Studies being concerned today with *cultures*, rather than *culture* coming from a complex disciplinary history, whose beginnings will be sketched in what is to follow. A reasonably satisfying explanation has to do with the significant developments and priorities in the field. Initially, as it will be seen, the investigations of American Civilization posited the existence of a unitary culture; today, in the age of multiculturalism, the cultural patchwork features a picture of almost bewildering diversity, even antagonism, with culture as a whole being the site of struggle in which the various American cultures compete and even clash. This cultural diversity and dynamism is due not only to the diversity of the ethnic groups involved, but also to the complexity of a landscape featuring regional, national, transnational coordinates and characteristic features. Although obviously referring to subsequent, more critical forms of American Studies, Gene Wise considers that both this interdisciplinary field and the subject it deals with, America itself, have been shaped as rebellious challenges to the previously established political or scholarly order: “Both began as revolts against the established order – for America, the Old World, for American Studies, the traditional disciplines” (293-294).

A variety of aspects having to do with historic and historical, economic and cultural realms have shaped and influenced the complex narrative of American Studies as it emerged in the US at the beginning of the 20th century. Before developing, as it happens today, both transnationally and internationally, the first forms of what would be called later American Studies developed in the United States. The beginning of American Studies as an interdisciplinary area of inquiry (AE and BE) is linked to the convergence of research and teaching in the areas of American history and American literature.

Political and geopolitical developments at the beginning of what would be called the American Century led to a number of English departments across the US to introduce, rather

² It is worth noting, though, that as late as 1979, such prominent figures as William Goetzmann, saw American Studies as not an exercise in diversity, as it provides ‘a definite unity in solving questions that do not arise in traditional departments and disciplines’ (376).

³ Its “pillars” being Raymond Williams, Edward Thomson, Richard Hoggart.

marginally and timidly, courses in American literature. American history had already gained academic respectability at that time. America had come of age, so to speak, and its distinct culture had become important. America's pivotal role in the late stages of World War I and then in the wake of what was optimistically called at the time "the War to end all Wars" (see Woodrow Wilson's 11 points) made the emerging superpower's profile even more prominent. Even before the US's involvement in the First World War, but especially during that great conflict and then in the following decade, a large number of courses, which had begun by stressing the Americanness of the country's literature, began to combine elements of American literature and American history under the interdisciplinary umbrella of American Civilization (do we still make a distinction between culture and civilization?)

The general trend was to emphasize the cultural achievements of the new major geopolitical player. As a result of a tendency that reflected the general attitudes of any previous major powers, a great importance was paid to the uniqueness and special characteristics of the New World. The ideas fueling American Exceptionalism were becoming ever more prominent, in keeping with a fast development of a distinct cultural construction of an American identity. It was also an age of exuberance but also of serious fast changes, the positive changes of the Progressive Era. It was the age many would now, quite superficially, associate with the bootleggers of the Prohibition and such figures as the real Al Capone and the fictional Jay Gatsby of Fitzgerald's best-known novel, as well as with one specific type of emancipated young woman: the flapper. Others would feel tempted to prefer the Progressive Era label to the more flippant, and shorter one of the Roaring Twenties. The Progressive Era will witness the emergence of the first significant women's movement, that of the suffragettes, leading to American female citizens obtaining the right to vote in 1920. That was, obviously, more important to more women than the right to have fun in a more iconoclastic way, to smoke in public spaces and to dance Charleston, which the flappers of the time came to enjoy. However, in what was becoming American Studies, women as well as members of non-WASP ethnic groups were not visible yet. The humanities and more specifically the history and literature developments about to converge into American studies featured members of the white, male, privileged, more affluent social sections, still considering that English meant British canonical literature and culture, with American elements as an addition. These were pleased with how things went in America, yet still thought that elitism was preferable to populism, that Britain still set the standards and the approaches. It was about the time (1930) F.R. Leavis, in Britain, was publishing his elitist "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture." However, things were moving toward the understanding of culture in the wider, anthropological sense which would be adopted by subsequent trends on both sides of the Atlantic, and which would gradually feature in the populist stream of both American Studies and in what would become the very populist British Cultural Studies School.

After the exuberance of the Roaring Twenties, at the end of the Prohibition Era, another important development affected both America and most of the capitalist world: the Great Depression, following after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Capitalism, since it is not state-planned, shows that it unfolds unpredictably, going through boom and bust cycles. After the economic boom of the early twenties came the bust of the end of the decade extending well into the next. The economic difficulties caused by the capitalist crisis were made even worse by a succession of three droughts in the 1930s. It was the time of the Dust Bowl, where severe drought was accompanied by dust storms, devastating many of the farming areas in the South Central area of the US, especially Oklahoma. The economic crisis and the droughts affected many of the ordinary American people. The gloomy picture was completed by the tensions caused by the migration of the poor people from the more seriously hit areas toward

the more affluent ones. This can be seen in literature in the contrast of the partying world of Fitzgerald's novel and the terrible plight of the "Okies"⁴ in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The grim realism and social criticism of Steinbeck's novel is in keeping with a new trend in American Studies. The previous enthusiasm of those promoting the emerging excellence of a new canonical American literature (mainly written by white males), was gradually mitigated. Social and sociological concerns joined literary studies and history in an attempt at grasping the complexity of American experience at a time of crisis and more apparent injustice and inequality. Another significant development linking literature, history and geography at this critical moment was the emergence of regional courses in American Studies. As famous literary illustrations providing artistic substance to the scholarly investigations of area or regional course in AS are, in addition to Steinbeck's description of the exodus from Oklahoma to California in the above-mentioned novel, the creation of the fictional Yoknapatawpha in Faulkner's novels, a representation of the real lower Mississippi area of Lafayette County.

Some famous American regions will be indelibly linked to such writers as Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bret Harte, Mark Twain and a whole series of authors that will become associated with various parts of a huge country. The studies that will focus on these authors and these regions, combining literary, historical, sociological and geographical concerns, still under the umbrella of American Civilization, were gradually turning into what would soon coalesce in the evolving shape of American Studies. New England, the South, the West, found their way into the American cultural mythology of distinct areas contributing something essential to the general ethos of a very special country.

At the end of the 1930s, in addition to the realism and social criticism of some of the economic difficulties and inequalities which inevitably became more prominent in an age of economic crisis, another ideological context became relevant. In the Old World, the totalitarian doctrines of Fascism and Communism were contrasted with the American way of life and with the principles promoted by the Declaration of Independence about the unalienable rights.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the ideological and geopolitical confrontation with the Soviet Union during the first decades of the Cold War, especially during the so-called Age of Consensus of the 1950s, added a pronounced character to American Studies. These studies promoted American democratic values through texts expressing the consensus and solidarity of the mainstream white population. Ethnic minorities and women were less represented in the examination of American Civilization in that age.

Extending from the conformist 1950s to the countercultural late 1960s and early 1970s, the prevailing approach in American Studies is known as the Myth and Symbol School. The first prominent volume illustrating the approach of this school is Henry Nash Smith's 1950 book, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Smith's work examines the imaginary dimensions of the "American Western Frontier" and of the impact that the myths and symbols associated with the exploration and settling of that geographical area had had on an emerging American identity and civilization. In the preface to the twentieth anniversary printing of the book, Henry Nash Smith clarifies one of his main aims:

I wanted to protest against the common usage of the term "myth" to mean simply an erroneous belief, and to insist that the relation between the imaginative constructions I was dealing with and the history of the West in the nineteenth century was a more complicated affair (vii).

⁴ The derogative name given to the poor immigrants coming from Oklahoma to California in the years of the Great Depression.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny is part and parcel of this nation-making narrative, which Smith associated with such literary illustrations as Walt Whitman's expansive poetry. In addition, there are such iconic fictional and real life figures as Daniel Boone, Leatherstocking, Kit Carson or Buffalo Bill. Frederick Jackson Turner's theory thesis, expounded in his classic work, *The Frontier in American History*, is also given due importance in Smith's work. In it, Turner claims that the frontier spirit, involving courage and resourcefulness, that the westward-moving settlers developed in their American odyssey, became the defining feature of American identity. Is it by mere coincidence that, in the heyday of the Myth and Symbol approach to America, one of President Kennedy's most famous speeches develops the same thesis? In the 1960s speech that confirms his willingness to accept the nomination as a Democratic presidential candidate, Kennedy described America standing on the threshold of a 'New Frontier' of new hopes and new challenges, while also contemplating the past associated with the historic place where he was giving the speech, California.

Other important works are *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955) by R.W.B. Lewis, and *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, by Leo Marx, published in the mid-1960s.

The late 1960s and early 1970s created the premises for a new paradigm in American Studies. It was the age of the emergence of the largest postwar generation of young people coming of age: the baby boomers. They were less conformist than previous generations, more open to cultural pluralism, more open to express their dissent from mainstream culture. Culture was no longer perceived as the expression of artistic and intellectual excellence, but as a site of confrontation, of struggle, of challenges to the status quo. Many academics on American campuses defined themselves not as representatives of the established and conformist education systems, but as rebels. Robert Merideth's 1969 pamphlet's title "Subverting Culture: The Radical as Teacher," is more than revealing to this effect. The theoretical framework of American Studies is moving further away from the Myth and Symbol School toward an assimilation of ideas from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and the developments brought about by the rise of the British Cultural Studies program, initially at the University of Birmingham, as already been mentioned.

The connection between the project of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and transatlantic developments taking place within the emerging interdisciplinary inquiry about to be finally established as American Studies and then American Cultural Studies was far from unproblematic. A very significant aspect of it is to see how one of the central figures of the Myth and Symbol Approach, Leo Marx, from the vantage point of one particular, idiosyncratic post-1969 perspective, sees both his side of the Atlantic and what was going on in Britain since the early 1950s. Starting from a discussion he overheard between Richard Hoggarth, the previously mentioned "pillar" of British Cultural Studies and an American scholar defining himself in relation to his "belief" in America (more specifically in what one might call "American exceptionalism"), Leo Marx notes the critical tendency that has developed in American Studies after the exuberant pride of the 1950s and early 1960s: "somewhere back of the American Studies idea there once lurked an amorphous conception of the United States as the embodiment of a social ideal"(400).

A dramatic change of attitude occurred in the age of the counterculture, coinciding with the heyday of the Civil Rights movement and of Women's Liberation Movement. It was also the age in which a number of until then less visible communities became aware of their specific, different identity, promoting their cultural revival under such names as Native American Renaissance. In American Studies the years of the late 1970s and of the 1980s constitute the heyday of the age of identity politics and of multiculturalism, with the appearance and consolidation of Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, Chicano and Chicana

Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Queer Studies, Asian American Studies. The discourses of racism, intolerance, sexism, xenophobia come under the scrutiny of a number of critical, militant approaches to inequality and discrimination. Multicultural and comparative approaches to the various coexisting cultures in terms of *contact areas* and *borderland discourse* have become increasingly prominent in the interdisciplinary field of AS. Thus, a focus on the discourse of boundaries and difference, liminal spaces and hybridizations prevails upon the previous examinations of what appeared to be central in established canonical texts seen as expressions of a unitary American culture. Understanding cultural American identity came to be no longer considered in terms of a homogeneous, mainstream culture promoting consensus around the American way of life, but in terms of difference, defined by race and ethnicity, class and gender.

In succession, quickly emerging in what can still be considered contemporary contexts, both intellectual and cultural as a whole, in which *globalization* and its problematic issues replace such concepts and attending discourses as *postmodernism* and *postcolonialism*, a transnational turn in the development of AS tended to be observed in the following years. Transnational approaches to American identity challenged and debunked myths and symbols upholding a unitary, homogeneous Americanness, exploring trans-national cultural exchanges and interactions in which America both projects its imperial power abroad and is alternatively reconsidered from various international and foreign perspectives, which sometimes deal with the diasporas of various immigrant communities within the United States rather than on American traditional practices, beliefs and canonical texts.

Extreme positions, such as exaggerated focus on marginality and widespread oppression and discrimination on the one hand, and a nationalistic, jingoistic cultivation of the myth of American Exceptionalism, on the other hand, are likely to, and have led to, a number of cultural and countercultural backlashes. Are there ways in which to achieve a balanced perspective, promoting pluralist views on the complexity of the American experience? A certain detachment appears to empower the apparently less biased external spectators of America and its culture, enabling them to contribute in significant ways to a pluridimensional, in depth exploration of one of the most dynamic and influential culturescapes in the contemporary world. For the time being, the current text aimed at sketching, as its title suggested, the questions and issues that developments in what came to be called American Studies animated in order to trace the complex itineraries that led to the bewildering diversity in Cultural Studies and American Studies today, to say nothing about the equally complex relationship between Cultural studies and Literary Studies.⁵

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⁵ In this respect, Anthony Easthope's volume, already three decades old, is equally illuminating and provocative: *Literary into Cultural Studies*.

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