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American Studies in Europe: 'Divided We Stand'

With its military and economic influence, its cultural and linguistic reach, the United States is—for better or for worse—too formidable and potent not to be understood clearly and critically. HOW to understand the USA has been a vehemently discussed issue ever since 1998 ASA president Janice Radway suggested that "American Studies" better be re-named "cultural studies," or some such. Since then we have seen the arrival of a plethora of new terms – starting with the not so exciting coinage "New American Studies" and diversifying into a host of terms that preferably include "trans-," "cross-," "anti-," "post-," "comparative," "queer," and even "diasporic" – a term which until not so long ago usually only referred to the history of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present. If, as then ASA President Emory Elliott argued in his 2006 address, "diversity" is now the key concept in American Studies, this lively pool of buzzwords certainly testifies to it. While it also seems to indicate a trend towards the globalization of American Studies, this process itself spawns another debate that is tied to the object of our discipline as well as to the concepts and tools of the field itself: is globalization actually Americanization – often understood as the unfettered spread of ruthless capitalism across the globe? If so, how to assess this phenomenon with the methods of our discipline? Has Radway's 1998 provocative suggestion been vindicated and has "America" has become a diffuse free-floating signifier for "trans/international" Americanization? As European scholars we have one advantage: looking across the Atlantic, our object of study is very clearly visible – the USA have not disappeared in the flood of buzzwords, and there is little indication they would do so in the foreseeable future. The New Americanists will still try to understand the same old USA, but with different concepts; the debate about US exceptionalism will continue, enriched by more comparative aspects and cross-cultural perspectives. For a better understanding, as Winfried Fluck, Stipe Grgas, and Jelena Šesnić, among others, suggest in recent papers, scholars might pay more attention to the importance of capitalism and economy as decisive forces in U.S. society and culture. We might also look more closely into the extremely mediated character of everyday life in the

States, including the new media; at the ownership of media conglomerates like FOX, Time Warner, etc.; and at the impact they have on the practice and processes of U.S. democracy. Another research focus could be the compatibility of fundamentalist religion and democratic society. I expect that the intensified sharing of U.S. and international American Studies scholars' perspectives will help us to gradually establish a more comprehensive view on all these issues under discussion, and to better place them in their appropriate historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts. For our research and teaching of U.S. culture and society, only an inclusive approach guarantees the necessary and most authentic level of complexity and differentiation which can make students aware that the flood of simulacra they receive via everyday mass media is exactly that.

Key words: New American Studies, contextuality, transculturality, globalization, exceptionality

As Paul Lauter once put it in his insightful study *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park*, the U.S.A. – with its military and economic influence, its cultural and linguistic reach – is, for better or worse, too formidable and potent *not* to be understood clearly and critically. HOW to understand the U.S.A., though, has been a vehemently discussed issue ever since ASA president Janice Radway suggested at the 1998 annual meeting that "American Studies" better be re-named "cultural studies," or some such.

Let me insert a short personal comment here: When I was born, in 1947, what sometimes is called the "American Century" had almost completed its first half, but I was not really aware of that. The State Treaty of 1955 returned to Austria the independence it had lost with its annexation to Nazi Germany in 1938, and the withdrawal of all allied troops was celebrated nationally. From a little boy's perspective, this was a very fine thing – no school, and my father even bought me a big cone of ice cream, a treat reserved for very special occasions. The U.S.A., in my memory, did not figure prominently in these events, except as one of the names of the four powers that signed the treaty in Vienna; our town was in the British zone of occupation, I had never seen a *live* U.S. citizen, and it took another ten years or so before I did. In

short, for many years my "America" was largely one of my own imaginary as it had taken shape nourished by the reading of literature and, since the early 1960s, the first – rather limited – TV broadcasts. I believe that many Europeans of my generation first "met America" in a similar way. Looking back, it was probably not the worst way and, for all practical purposes, there were not many other options available at the time. One should remember that, even nowadays, in the age of mass tourism, only a relatively small number of Europeans have extended personal experience of the U.S.A. (and *vice versa*); what many of the tourists actually take home in *knowledge and understanding* of the U.S.A. after they have visited Epcot Center, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, or spent a week in New York City or San Francisco or L.A. is a different question altogether. But I guess it's still better than having hot chocolate on Ghiradelli square with your avatar on web 2.0.

To resume: Radway's provocative address of 1998 drew strong criticism from many U.S. American Studies scholars who felt that the very foundations of their profession were under attack. European scholars in the field sympathized with their American colleagues, but most of them never felt threatened, and the explanation for this difference in attitudes, then as now, is simple and pertinent: Looking at the U.S.A. from across the Atlantic, the object of our study – the United States – is still clearly discernible and has not disappeared. But what has at least come under very close scrutiny, if not disappeared, is the notion of American exceptionalism and the idea of a monolithic nation state, both of which had been implicit or explicit theoretical pillars of American Studies for many decades.

Over the past sixteen years, we have seen the arrival of a plethora of new terms, starting with the not-so-exciting coinage "New American Studies," and diversifying into a host of terms that preferably include "trans-," "cross-," "anti-," "post-," "comparative," "queer," "planetary," and even "diasporic" – a term which until not so long ago usually only referred to the history of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present. If, as ASA President Emory Elliott argued in his 2006 address, "diversity" is now the key concept in American Studies, this lively pool of new terms certainly testifies to it. (A

few years ago Werner Sollors, referring to this development, mentioned that his students at Harvard love to play "buzzword bingo" in lecture classes.) One may consider this new diversity part of the trend towards the globalization of American Studies. The foundation of the *International Association for American Studies (IASA)* in 2000 and, more recently, that of the *International Association of Inter-American Studies* (IAS/EIA) in 2009 are aspects of this development, as is the appearance of new Journals like *Transatlantic Studies* (2002) and *Journal of Comparative American Studies* (2003).

This process itself ignites another debate that is tied to the object of our discipline as well as to the concepts and tools of the field itself: In our age of globalized corporations and hedge funds, is the original American Studies concept of "area studies" still useful? In 2011, the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin organized an international conference that asked this question in a very comprehensive way; the resulting volume – *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas* – was published in May 2014 and offers a good survey of theories and practices in contemporary American Studies. Among others, Winfried Fluck lucidly discusses the positions of the two currently competing major movements, the multiculturalists and the New Americanists, and points out their advantages and shortcomings in his contribution "The Concept of Recognition and American Cultural Studies." Of particular interest in our current context is Ulfried Reichardt's "American Studies and Globalization," in which he discusses the U.S.A. as an important – but not necessarily dominant – node of the global network and explores the usefulness of the concepts of multi-perspectivism and hybridity.

I would argue that, while the U.S.A. has not disappeared in the flood of new buzzwords and there is little indication it might do so in the foreseeable future, there have been enormous changes in available resources as well as in methodologies and approaches. While my generation of American Studies scholars outside the U.S. had the problem of how to gain access to resources, today's scholars are facing the opposite problem: Which of the infinite pieces of print and electronic information should we use? How do we know they are

reliable, accurate, or representative? As we know, the major internet search machines filter their results according to the profiles they have constructed for us from our previous searches. Do we have to constantly change our internet identities to be reasonably sure we really get unfiltered search results?

In addition to these practical issues, U.S. society itself and the position of the U.S.A. in the world has seen drastic changes over the past decades. I grew up in the times of the Cold War, the Iron Curtain, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the space race, etc. – today, the primary U.S. enemy figures are fundamentalist Muslim terrorists; the U.S. space agency has outsourced space travel to private businesses and, for better or worse, (still) relies on Russian rockets to send their astronauts to the International Space Station (despite the current tensions in U.S.–Russian relations); the U.S. auto-stereotype has changed from "melting pot" to "salad bowl"; a series of outrageous scandals in the business and banking sector – from ENRON to Freddie Mac and Lehman Brothers, to name just a few – has (once more) drastically revealed major weaknesses of global capitalism; and an African-American has been elected president twice in a row, though racism and the ideology of white supremacy remain as rampant as ever, as sadly documented by frequent shootings of African-Americans by self-declared vigilantes or the police in cities across the nation.

As regards world politics, in the wake of the terror attacks of 9/11/2001, the United States started wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that so far have turned out to be of somewhat limited benefit to the citizens of these two countries but also a very heavy burden for the U.S. economy and the collective American psyche, as well as for the global power structure. Understandably, the current U.S. Administration has avoided taking leading roles in the current conflicts in Lybia as well as Syria – and gets criticized for that as well. This political situation also reverberates in our professional field, and – in addition to an increasingly critical view of scholars – has brought along some collateral damage: greater reluctance in funding U.S.-related projects (including student exchanges), longer waiting periods in filling American Studies vacancies, considerations about possibly closing down American Studies pro-

grams/departments or merging them with others to form "North American Studies" units – a concept which university administrators in the Humanities find very interesting in this age of budget cuts, the more so as it also seems to implement ideas of "transnational" or "transcultural" American Studies. All of this goes to suggest that the pursuit of American Studies, one way or the other, has always been a politically loaded activity, during the Cold War as well as in the current age of the "War on Terror" and of globalization.

Now – have my remarks so far been "cross-cultural" simply because I am an Austrian talking in Croatia about the U.S.A. and American Studies? What exactly do we mean when we talk about a "cross-cultural approach" in American Studies? In his response to Emory Elliott's presidential address at the 2006 ASA, Winfried Fluck points out that diversity of perspectives may be desirable but does not in itself guarantee a new approach. Asking the question of what kind of knowledge we need when doing American Studies, he argues – talking about "transnational approaches" – that, rather than going outside and following a "diasporic" path that meanders along the margins, scholars from outside the U.S. in particular should go inside the U.S.A., to the center, and pursue (again) the original goal of American Studies – the analysis of the cultural sources of American power that helps us to understand – and here I quote –

> [. . .] the historically unique constellations that have been developed by the United States: an empire that bases its power, Iraq notwithstanding, not on the occupation of territory but on unique, often hardly visible forms of international dominance; a form of democracy that offers the amazing sight of a continued and stable dominance of business and social elites by way of democratic legitimation; and the fascinating spectacle of a culture that has transformed an egalitarian ideology into a relentless race for individual recognition [. . .] (Fluck 2007: 29)

I could not agree more; our colleagues Jelena Šesnić (253) and Stipe Grgas (Hicks and Radeljković 2007) seem to think along similar lines, and other contributions to this workshop also sound a similar theme: that schol-

ars should look more closely at the importance of these "business and social elites" – i.e., of capitalism and the economy – in order to better understand how the American system, American culture, and the idea of "America" work. In our investigations of how all these factors interact, I believe it is absolutely legitimate to draw on comparative and cross-cultural perspectives where they are useful – but we are not *always* obliged to do so.

Let me become more specific: One of the most debated issues in today's studies of the U.S.A. in Europe are no longer the "lack of history" or the "absence of culture," which representatives of "old European cultures" used to consider the foremost characteristic of our Big Cousin across the Atlantic. (I am reminded of an episode at Stanford University in 1982, when the partner of a German visiting scholar phrased this Eurocentric attitude rather bluntly: "You have the deserts, we have the culture!") Rather, the discussion today is focused around the question of how to handle, on the theoretical as well as the practical level, the abundance of literatures and cultures that have surfaced under the new inclusive multi-cultural American self-image since the 1960s – from new paradigms in literary and cultural theory to the never-ending debate about canon-formation and the pragmatic problems of selection and representation in everyday teaching. Given the enormous diversity of contemporary cultures in today's U.S.A., I would argue that one has to apply cross-cultural approaches even within the United States.

Far from presenting yet another master narrative, all I offer here is to sketch out how I prefer to approach things in my field of U.S. literature and culture, and I would like to focus on two terms, "contextual" and "cross-cultural," understanding them not as opposites but as complementary.

By **contextual** I mean that we should always keep in mind that literary, socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts are interactive historical processes rather than parallel chronological strings of individuals and events that somehow never meet. This begins with pointing out the very diverse goals and motivations of the early settlers in Virginia and New England, respectively; the dissenting voices within the Puritan regions (Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, etc.); the pros and cons in the War of Independence; the multi-

ple aspects of domestic and international expansionist tendencies during the nineteenth century; the complex causes and aspects of the Civil War and the dynamics of industrialization and mass immigration following in its wake; the ambiguities of the "Crusade for Democracy" in World War I parallel in time with rather colonialist military applications of the Monroe Doctrine in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific; or the ambiguous role of the United States in the events around the Russian Revolution of 1917. And this would continue right up to more contemporary issues that baffle many Europeans, such as the idea that the somewhat adolescent but not really dangerous sexual escapades of a U. S. president could lead to such a costly special investigation and even impeachment, whereas it does not seem to be much of an issue that other administrations have had close ties to fraudulent big businesses whose collapse impoverished hundreds of thousands of small shareholders, or that they handed out profitable government contracts to their friends. Or, in foreign politics, the puzzle of why the United States would help Soviet-supported Saddam Hussein in his eight-year war against fundamentalist-islamic Iran, then support fundamentalist Muslim Mujaheddin against a Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, and then end up eliminating Saddam's only non-fundamentalist dictatorship in the region, claiming that this is absolutely necessary in order to succeed in the fight against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

On a different level of contextuality, not many people know that Henry Highland Garnet (1815–1882), an African-American who escaped from slavery through the underground railroad and became an ordained Presbyterian minister and a radical abolitionist in New York, in his "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" at the Negro national convention in Buffalo, NY, in 1843, called for resistance against an evil and immoral government – much along the lines of argument for which Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" became famous six years later. Students may also be interested to learn that Garnet was the first African-American citizen to enter the U. S. House of Representatives not as a servant through the back door but rather as a guest speaker invited by President Abraham Lincoln to address the House in February 1865, after Congress had passed the

bill which became the Thirteenth Amendment. That same city, Washington, D.C., had before the Civil War housed the largest slave market in the nation; as is now widely known thanks to the 2013 movie *Twelve Years A Slave*, in 1841 (two years before Garnet gave his abolitionist address in Buffalo) Solomon Northup, a free African-American from Saratoga, NY, was kidnapped and kept confined and shackled in slave trader William William's slave pen "Yellow House" in view of the Capitol before being shipped to New Orleans and sold to a plantation owner in the Red River region of Northern Louisiana. After Northup regained his freedom, with the support of New York State judiciary, he eventually brought both his abductors and the slave trader before the court, yet in neither case was any of the culprits sentenced.

Another case, today no longer as sensational as it was about forty years ago, is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "re-discovered" short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a text that combines techniques like stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, self-conscious/unreliable narrator, etc., to produce one of the most powerful short narratives of nineteenth-century literature – twenty or thirty years before James Joyce or Marcel Proust or William Faulkner became famous for using similar techniques in their works. It was not so much the unusual literary discourse, though, but rather its rebellious feminist content that guaranteed, in the socio-cultural context of its original publication date (in the January 1892 issue of *The New England Magazine*), that the story would soon be "forgotten" and would not make it into any anthology of U.S. literature until the 1960s. We might be somewhat doubtful of the reason the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1891 gave for rejecting the story – because "[he] could not forgive [himself] if [he] made others as miserable as [he] made [himself]"; as Susan Lanser comments, the same argument of devastation and misery can be said about the work of Edgar Allan Poe, yet most of his work has been printed and studied by academics ever since its publication (cf. Lanser 1989, *passim*). In the 1890s, when U.S. newspaper advertisements where full of remedies against *male* "nervous weaknesses" and other ailments like "insomnia, fits, nervous debility, lost vitality, seminal losses, errors of youth or over-indulgence" (cf. Hölbling/Tally 2001: 169), a story that ended

with the male character fainting at the sight of his deranged wife – living proof of his failure both as husband and medical doctor – was not something the male-dominated literary market could appreciate.

Many more examples might be mentioned – e. g., certain structural affinities between Native American and African-American "storytelling" and postmodern narrative techniques that warrant more scholarly attention than they have received so far. This contextual perspective does not necessarily diminish the impact or importance of so-called "classical" and "canonized" texts, such as those of Thoreau, Faulkner, or Pynchon. But it reminds us that historical processes are considerably more complex than a traditional "peak" view of history would often have us assume. I would also argue, as did James Hicks and Zvonko Radeljković in Sarajevo a couple of years ago, that U.S.-American literature and culture offer us a representative plurality of discourses from a still growing number of diverse cultures and, as a result, strongly invites cross-cultural readings which by necessity also have a comparative component.

This **cross-cultural** approach, already implied in some of what I have already said, not only discusses the above-mentioned cultural diversity within the U.S.A. but also puts U.S. cultures into a comparative perspective in order to focus on their special contributions. Additionally, it investigates how Americans see themselves (or wish to be seen) internationally, and how scholars from different cultures actually do see the U.S.A. From its origin in Human Relations Studies and Ethnography (Murdock 1949; White 1991), where cross-cultural research is based on a vast array of comparative statistical data across many cultures, the term was, in the 1980s and 1990s, also adopted by American Studies scholars, though there it usually applies to the comparative analysis of more specific cultural aspects. Especially over the past 30 years or so, European scholars have increasingly focused on the specific relations of their countries with and contributions to U.S. culture and society (immigration studies, literatures other than English within the U.S.A., immigrant influences in the film industry, the media, and other sections of society, etc.). Since the 1980s, a good number of European and U.S. Amer-

ican Studies scholars have focused their research on cross-cultural aspects, and I can point to a few which I have found quite informative for my own work. In 1986, Werner Sollors added distinctive new perspectives to the raging U.S. "culture wars" with his study *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*; he went on to become one of the first public opponents of the "English Only" movement, together with Marc Shell co-edited the anthology *Multilingual America Transnationalism: Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature* (1998), and has continued to investigate cross-cultural and inter-ethnic questions ever since. The 1990s also saw the publication of Rob Kroes' fabulously punning title *If you Have Seen One, You've Seen the Mall* (1996), as well as Richard Pells' *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (1998), looking at American and European attitudes from each other's perspectives.

The opening of Eastern Europe in 1989 has added a rich number of new aspects and perspectives to this angle of research, as the ideological divisions of the Cold War and the very physical barrier of the Iron Curtain created a quite different set of perceptions and interpretations of the U.S. – An anecdotal example: A few years ago, at an American Studies Seminar in the Czech Republic, I learned from Russian scholars that during the heydays of the Cold War, when U. S. (as well as Austrian) citizens were undergoing regular nuclear attack drills, built fall-out shelters, and learned how to protect themselves with the *New York Times* (or, in Austria, *Die Presse*) while Hollywood turned out nuclear disaster movies, there was little of that hype in the USSR. Apparently, most Soviet citizens did not really believe the U.S.A. would ever attack them and wrote off these rumors as government propaganda, whereas the Westerners were – for reasons that might be worth investigating – more inclined to believe their own governments.

On a different level, Ph.D. theses at our Department of American Studies in Graz, for example, have dealt with cross-cultural aspects that also indicate the diversity of possible approaches: on Slovene authors in the United States and Canada; emigrants from San Marino in the U.S.A. (written by an Austrian who married into a San Marino family); on Native American cul-

tures in urban L.A.; on the presentation of Austria in Anglo-American texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (written by a native of Greece who studied English and German in Austria); on the reception of popular U.S. TV series by Austrian audiences; or on cross-cultural issues in autobiographical texts by Austrian Jewish refugees in the U.S.A. Current projects in this field include a study of female Arab-American literatures and cultures as well as transnational aspects of (female) identities.

Possible research areas where cross-cultural approaches might open up new perspectives are plenty, I believe. One branch of research might be looking at issues of "globalization" and "Americanization" and investigating in depth whether – and if so, in which instances – these two terms are synonymous or show different structural affinities in different cultures. As we know, global corporations have lately adapted very diversified regional/local management strategies, and regional concepts of "America" as well as of "global" often have rather divergent connotations.

In view of the recent revival of strongly religious rhetoric in U.S. politics, we might also do well to make greater analytical efforts to better understand what on the surface comes across as rather irreconcilable opposites: fundamentalist religious beliefs and a free democratic system; or even (apropos "democratic system") the claim that in elections "every vote counts" though the actual voting/counting of votes (mechanical or electronic) is subject to procedures that leave many Europeans simply stunned. Another promising field for future research, I believe, would be an investigation into the extremely mediated and visual quality of everyday life in the United States, including the ownership of media conglomerates such as FOX, Time Warner, Comcast, etc. – as well as of the impact this has on the practice and the understanding of democracy and its processes. For example, thanks to the continuous rhetoric of the U.S. administration before and around the Iraq War in 2003 – and at that time practically all U.S. media spread this news without questioning it – 50% of Americans seriously believed that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein actually co-operated; as was the case with the claim of Saddam Hussein's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction, not a shred of factual

evidence for this claim has become public, even more than ten years later. For current examples of how mediated reality – and not only in the U.S. – is often limited to highly opinionated and selective TV presentations, just follow any U.S. election campaign.

To Conclude:

I believe that European – and also global – American Studies will continue to widen and diversify along the theoretical and practical approaches outlined above, intensified by a much stronger global cooperation of scholars in the field, and probably by another turn of the screw of critical analysis with respect to issues like exceptionality, social justice, income distribution, barrier-free education, equal rights, democratic practice, etc. So the focus may well come to lie even more on the differences rather than the similarities of auto- and hetero-stereotypes; but the better we understand our differences, the more clearly we can also recognize what is shared in common ground. A stronger cooperation among American Studies scholars inside and outside the U.S.A. will be very fruitful for our efforts to provide answers to at least some of the issues mentioned above. For practical purposes, it may be useful to bundle our global expertise even more and have cross-cultural teams (in the sense of planetary, as well) of American Studies scholars focus on specific issues. Today's electronic tools considerably facilitate such co-operations. I consider it our obligation as scholars and teachers of American Studies to place events and developments in their appropriate historical and socio-cultural contexts and point out the long history of diversified social, political, regional, and cultural groups and movements in the United States.

Not the least among what is usually considered "typical American characteristics" is the continuing ability to question the *status quo* and to measure contemporary political and cultural practices against the original ideas of the Constitution. Another one is, for better or worse, the ongoing tug of war between extreme conformism and group pressure (e.g., the demands of militant pro-life movements) and extreme individualism bordering on anarchy (e.g., recently the Cliven Bundy bunch on their ranch in Utah). In spite of some

recent serious damage to its once shiny reputation as the arbiter of freedom and democracy, the U.S.A. still presents a model of a society that offers more individual freedom and possibilities than many other societies on the globe, even though this means that diverse interest groups may clash quite harshly at times.

I believe that *any* streamlining of processes and developments – be it for political, ideological, ethnic, class, or gender reasons – inevitably results in the construction of rather "shortened & simplified" discourses on the subject. For our understanding and teaching of U.S. culture and society, only an *inclusive* approach guarantees the necessary – and certainly the more authentic – complexity and differentiation in our understanding of "America." In particular, I think we also need to make our students aware that the flood of simulacra they receive via today's mass media and the World Wide Web are very often exactly that: copies of originals that never existed. Finally, we need to remember that, to begin with, "America" was a very European concept, and while looking in from the outside can reveal what those on the inside may overlook, we have to take particular care that, when we cast our gaze across the Atlantic, we see more than our own reflections in a mirror designed by Picasso.

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