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Centro de Estudos Sociais
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Universidade de Coimbra

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RECONFIGURATION OF UNITED STATES
HEGEMONY**

**Dezembro de 2012
Oficina nº 394**

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**Oficina do CES n.º 394
Dezembro de 2012**

OFICINA DO CES

ISSN 2182-7966

Publicação seriada do

Centro de Estudos Sociais

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Inter-American Studies and the Reconfiguration of United States Hegemony*

Abstract: The past decades witnessed the flourishing of Inter-American Studies. Beyond the self-centeredness of the nation-based framework, Inter-American Studies is regarded as the spearhead methodology of American Studies and a timely response to both the transnational turn and the call for a more humble and politically engaged American Studies. Yet, many Latin American intellectuals show suspicion over this ‘new’ academic move and the authority it claims over the ‘other Americas.’ Because American Studies originated as the ideological branch of U.S. hegemony after WWII, the present waning hegemony of the West demands scrutiny about the implications of the current directions the field is taking, a debate this paper engages.

Keywords: transnationalism, U.S. hegemony, Americas, exceptionalism, Inter-American studies.

Introduction

In an essay called “Are We Post-American Studies?” Lawrence Buell (1996) argued for the creation of new “cartographical instruments” (p. 88) able to map what was emerging as a new American Studies increasingly aware of the need to question its central category – ‘America.’ Buell introduced America as a *pluriform entity non-coincident with the United States*, signaling the fragmentariness of the nation, its material and mythical dimensions, and also its fundamental relations with other nations. Buell concluded that “[f]or most Americanists in the United States, this contemporary problematization of ‘America’ requires a conceptual shift as fundamentally significant as feminist theory’s critique of the generic male pronoun a generation ago.” (Buell, 1996: 88) Buell’s remarks were part of an ongoing debate about the reconfiguration of American Studies that derived, on the one hand, from a growing awareness of the processes of globalization; while, on the other, they issued from the perception of the demise of Western hegemony, along with a series of humanistic values – freedom, democracy, and individualism –

* Text delivered at the 33rd Meeting of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies; supported by the CES Executive Board..

commonly assumed to be fully embodied in the myth of 'America.' Because the latter, in turn, had always been the safe ideological harbinger of the United States of America itself, American Studies scholars understood the need to reflect on the aims and position of a field of knowledge that could not deny its umbilical link with both the United States and its ideological matrix, and therefore could not but be implicated in the hegemonic discourse of 'America.'

Indeed, as a discipline conceived within the framework of nationalist Cold War politics, American Studies has had a hard time disentangling itself from the hegemonic structures of knowledge production, particularly the exceptionalist rhetoric of America; the 1960s were a pivotal moment in the inversion of that orientation, paving the way to the questioning of the nation's unity and homogeneity. My point here is to analyze how the present reconfigurations in the field, and the development of Inter-American Studies as a subfield may evince a new dynamics between hegemony and alterity. Attempting now to widen the critique onto a regional level and to broaden the scope of the interlocutors (borrowing from critiques of Latin Americanists, for instance), American Studies is proposing a deeper understanding of the constitution of the nation and its attending myths, in comparative terms that bring to the fore the necessary interdependence between the US, Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America.

Inter-American Studies asserts a vocation to be multilingual, critical and particularly attentive to the imperial legacies that still shape the relations in the Americas, and now ally themselves with the new global imperialisms (Rowe, 2000). I will be discussing how American Studies can indeed be conceived as both structurally imposed (the American Studies Association being precisely, at the time of its inception, 1951, a hegemonic formal institution), but also as an expression of opposition against the dominant rhetoric of US supremacy. As Gramsci has taught us, hegemony is not based on rule by force or coercion, but on permanent negotiation towards a renewal of consent, culture being the terrain where these negotiations take place, or where the play of contradictions shows. Following American Studies current transnational orientation embodied in the subfield of Inter-American Studies, I will be examining to what extent American Studies broadly speaking is in a position of dissent regarding the hegemonic power model in the Americas, or, instead, whether it is ultimately just a form of

revalidating consent. Or else, if this is a moment precisely of negotiation, American Studies being caught in a contradiction: in a position in-between consent and dissent, while trying to forge a counter-hegemonic position proper.

The Transnational Turn¹ – and its traps

Even though the so-called ‘transnational turn’ was conceptualized as such in 2000 by both John Carlos Rowe and Robert Gross, the concept comes under deep scrutiny in an ASA Presidential Address, Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s 2004 “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies.” According to Fishkin (2005), the transnational turn signaled the extensive internationalization of the field in recent years, which she also linked to the efforts of the ASA to reach out to and acknowledge the work done by scholars outside the U.S. Transnationalism in general synthesizes many of the tenets previously put forth by American Studies scholars such as Lawrence Buell (1996) and Janice Radway (1999): it proposes an exploration of the variety of American cultures and experiences within a larger framework than that of the nation, while admitting the interconnectedness between what happens inside and outside of national borders in tandem with the legacy of those connections. But the turn towards transnationalism on American Studies’ epistemology and methodology was there before, throughout the 1990s: it was on the order of the day in virtually every ASA meeting against the backdrop of the celebration of the ‘discovery of America’ and the Spanish-American War.

One after another, ASA Presidential Addresses, accurate barometers of the intellectual energies animating the field, voiced a general discontent with the enduring legacy of American exceptionalism, the strongest pillar of US hegemony. The very name of the Association bespoke this intimate relationship, involving American Studies in the arrogant self-centeredness associated with the nation. Many even defended radical solutions that included a renaming of both the field and the professional association. One after the other, ASA Presidents called for a reconfiguration of the field: Janice Radway’s 1998 Address, “What’s in a Name?” stressed the need to re-locate the study of both

¹ For more on the ‘transnational turn’ see: John Carlos Rowe (ed.) (2000), *Post-nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Robert Gross (2000), “The Transnational Turn: Rediscovering American Studies in a Wider World,” *Journal of American Studies*, 34(3), 373-393.

mythical or symbolic 'America' and real America, the United States, in a transnational context.

One of Radway's preoccupations was the need to broaden the object of analysis, not just in terms of context, but of examining the relationships it established and depended upon for its very constitution in relation to other objects and their respective contexts. This 'livingness,' as it were, would allow critics to observe the US as a living instead of a reified entity: in its "*intricate interdependencies*" with other nations, institutions, etc. (Radway, 1999: 10) Radway's descriptive term would find correspondence in a methodology based on "relational thinking" (*ibidem*) and bearing a focus on alterity: "American national identity is constructed in and through relations of difference" (*ibidem*: 11), Radway stressed, "it is brought into being through relations of dominance and oppression, through processes of super- and subordination. To take the measure of this national entity, it is necessary, then, to focus on these constitutive relationships, these intricate interdependencies." (*ibidem*: 12) These intricate interdependencies were not necessarily produced within national boundaries: "the near and far, the local and the distant" (*ibidem*: 15) were the new cardinal points towards "new forms of bifocal vision" (*ibidem*: 23) to "attend simultaneously to the local and the global." And Radway went on: "Such a project w[ould] entail the fostering of a relational and comparative perspective" (*ibidem*: 24) which implied collaborative study between scholars and institutions, North and South: "the [ASA should] actively pursue the intellectual and political consequences of *difference* by establishing connections with other organizations, whether they be subnational in focus, differently national, transnational, or regional" (*ibidem*: my emphasis). She further advocated close collaboration with the Latin American Studies Association in particular (*ibidem*: 19).

She went on as far as to suggest that the names of both the Association (the American Studies Association) and of the field be changed "with greater modesty" (*ibidem*: 18): either as to International Association for the Study of the United States (*ibidem*: 18), or Inter-American Studies Association. The latter "would have the advantage of comparatively connecting the study of U.S. history and cultures to those of North, Central, and South America and to the countries and cultures of the Caribbean as well." (*ibidem*: 20) There had been prior attempts to establish an Inter-American

scholarship in literary and cultural studies,² but it only gained momentum after Radway's imperative call.

Although the names of both the association and the field remain unchanged to this day, the discussion endured and has proved very productive. Radway's concerns came in line with and reinforced the progressive and activist orientation that was becoming the hallmark of AS, especially after the New Americanists³ had put dissent at the center of their critical practice. A pronounced counter-hegemonic edge came in view with their new take on the construction of identities that sought to disrupt the self-identificatory process with hegemonic structures – such as the nation –, thus increasing the individual's perception of him/herself as an agent⁴ able to engage with groups both within and beyond national borders.⁵

Yet, Radway remained well aware of the palpable ghosts that haunted these endeavors: “The ultimate question I want to pose [...] is whether this can be adequately done in the current historical context, dominated as it is by a rapidly advancing global neo-colonialism that specifically benefits the United States” (Radway, 1999: 8). The perception of the potential of global neo-colonialism to reconfigure empire reverberates in the critique of many Americanists⁶ who signal the ambivalences of the post- or transnational turn and the dangers entailed in the so-called new global order. As early as 1996, Doris Friedensohn remarked that American Studies was already a “global growth

² See, for instance: Earl Fitz, *Rediscovering the Americas: Inter-American literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) and, by the same author, *Interamerican Literature and Criticism: An Electronic Annotated Bibliography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998).

³ The term applies to a group of American Studies scholars that attacked the liberal consensus in American letters and culture and includes Lawrence Buell, Don Pease, Sacvan Bercovitch, Jane Tompkins, and Myra Jehlen; they defended a scholarship engaged with issues of race and gender and their presence in American literature and the engagement with social movements as well.

⁴ And even allowing that these critiques failed to reach the common citizen, they certainly had a deep impact on the institutional level, considering that some American Studies critics became the target of several attacks for being anti-American, as of ideological profiling in the post-9/11 period. See, a propos, Pease's very insightful interpretation of these homeland security politics as the new exceptionalisms, in his *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁵ This emphasis allowed the field to retrieve an interest that was particularly vivid during the 1960s, the association to social movements; according to George Lipsitz, American Studies, because of its object of study, has actually always been the result of social movements and their views of ‘America,’ which in turn contributed significantly to do away with the myth of exceptionalism. See *America Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), especially chapter XVI.

⁶ See, for instance: Bernd Ostendorf, *Transnational America: the Fading of Borders in the Western Hemisphere* (Heidelberg: Unversitätsverlag Winter, 2002) and Winfried Fluck, “A New Beginning? Transnationalisms,” *New Literary History*, 42(3) (Summer 2011), 365-384.

industry” (1996: 169) and pointed out many of the imperial dangers impending the enterprise, as well as the resentment it might create.

Also Donald Pease alerted to the agendas of the transnational turn; namely, the eminent danger of “a resurgent neoliberal politics of consensus” (2001: 4) that obscures the fact that “two of the core tenets of the discourse of American exceptionalism – the rule of law and neoliberal market ideology – have saturated the global processes in which America is embedded” and which include new forms of exceptionalism as the state of exception that Bush inaugurated (Pease, 2008: 22-23).⁷ Pease notes that a common transnational imaginary informs both “the ideologues of global capital” and “the left political movements mounted in opposition to its spread” (2001: 4). Which takes him to question whether the aim of a transnational perspective in American Studies is to “transform citizens into a transnational elite of corporate managers that would acquiesce to the conditions of the global economy” or in alternative “formulate models of resistance to them” (*ibidem*: 5-6) in order to give voice also to “the victims of globalization” (*ibidem*: 6).

Inter-American studies

Inter-American Studies has been developing amidst this critical turmoil, even though, to be fair, one must assert that the study of the Americas in a comparative perspective is not new; it has certainly taken many forms and been appropriated by different ideologies throughout the past century,⁸ both in the North and especially the South of the Americas. But because of the hegemony of US academia, the studies with a wider reach issued in the US tended to reflect the power relations in the continent, that is, they dealt with a North/South dichotomy that posed Latin America as the Other of the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, the critical code to read the also called ‘subcontinent’ was development theory, which subjected the South to a permanent condition of inferiority in relation to the so-called modern North.

Latin American Studies in the United States in turn developed side by side with American Studies itself. Both were outcomes of the machinery of knowledge production

⁷ For more on the new exceptionalisms, see Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism*.

⁸ V. Mendieta (2007).

of Cold War politics and were intended to provide the national security state with knowledge about different regions. Latin America was shelved amongst its ‘underdeveloped’ kin in Africa and Asia. Modernization was the main parameter of value, for area studies were indifferent to the colonial or imperial histories of these regions. The naturalization of the US model of progress/development ensued, as of its twin ideology, the American Way of Life. Even though this did not preempt a certain romanticization and exoticization of Latin America, in this case (Mendieta, 2007: 80-81), the production of knowledge within area studies reinforced the distinction between Us and Them that legitimated the US lead in the continent, stronger and more violent than ever, throughout the Cold War years decades.

In the ‘other Americas,’ a critical school determined to challenge the consensual representation of the North v. the South composed a powerful critique of US hegemony in the Americas: one with which some American Studies and Inter-American Studies scholars in the US have of late become conversant. Argentinian critic Walter D. Mignolo (2005), in a recent study on Latin America as an idea, recovers Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman’s silenced critique of the late 1950s, *La Invención de América*, to demonstrate the historicity and dialogical character of the ‘entities’ America and Latin America. Mignolo shows that they resulted from complex relations of interdependence prior to the existence of a North or a South in the continent, between the New World and Europe. Subordination of Latin America came in line with subordination of Mediterranean Europe, an extension of the play between different imperial powers. The underlying question in this scholarship is the relation between power and knowledge, or how the European will to know rested on a will to conquer, erase and transform the continent – and build it anew according to a political project and an imaginary that were Eurocentric and universalist at core. This was the legacy later to be taken up by the US herself, once she managed to replace the power of its former metropolis. Another very influential Latin Americanist, Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2008) denounced the enduring legacy of that history, the colonial worldview and its imprint in the current hegemonic design of the Americas – which he calls the coloniality of power. In the US academia, Chicano/Latino Studies made this connection as well: obviously because of the awareness of the construction of the Latino as Other, while decrying what is identified in

the field as ‘domestic imperialism.’ Critics such as José David Saldívar and Gloria Anzaldúa were among the first to theorize the necessary interdependency between the domestic and the foreign spheres.⁹

But the genealogy of this critique harks much back in time: to José Martí and Rubén Darío, the Brazilian Cultural Anthropologists, Joaquín Torres-García and Pablo Neruda, to name only a few; showing how the relations with the ‘Colossus of the North,’ as Martí defined the US, have for long been the order of the day in Latin America. In Comparative Literature, too, Cuban Latin Americanist Gustavo Pérez-Firmat asked *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*¹⁰ in a study that remains a landmark in this more recent design of a mutual perspective on the Americas. Yet, it was truly only after the boost given it by American Studies that such efforts gained visibility, under the new label Inter-American Studies which also speaks multitudes about the reservations it has triggered.¹¹

Inter-American Studies does register in the progressive tradition of American Studies I related earlier on: one attentive to history, context, and differences, now within the Americas. The new field is defended as based on a methodology that raises awareness and exposes the injustices bred by the deep inequality carved by history and geopolitics between North and South. As such, Inter-American Studies ultimately puts forward a renewed agenda for conceiving of (and putting to practice) more balanced relations between the Americas. If Latin America had been invented and was continuously portrayed and examined as the Other of the US, Inter-American Studies’ promise is to challenge that hegemonic representation and restore Latin America’s authority, foster a reciprocal critical perspective, and, above all, provide a fair ground for the analysis of the *interrelations* between ‘North’ and ‘South.’

But Latin Americanists don’t hide their uneasiness about this US academics’ appropriative interest in Latin American Studies reflected in the frequent self-explanatory and self-defensive tone of many of the recent studies assuming or discussing the

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderslands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America, Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Published by Duke UP (1990).

¹¹ A similar argument can be made about Comparative American Studies existing in Europe long before American Studies claimed comparativism as its recent touchstone. Maria Irene Ramalho works on this matter in “American Studies: A Powerful Usurpation,” (unpublished essay).

principles of Inter-American Studies.¹² After all, what prevents Inter-American Studies from becoming the extension of the US hegemonic project, just like the original field did, throughout the Cold War? What prevents it from becoming an expansionist academic exercise which, sustained by a strong institutional infrastructure can easily overlap a long history of comparative studies in the Americas, in this case, signed by reputed Latin American scholars throughout the past two centuries at least...?

Indeed, should you take a look at the tables of contents in some of the publications in this emergent field, you'll meet strictly US based academics' work on Latin America. Another obvious hegemonic statement regards the working language, English always, that is, work based on translations. Naturally, the practice is taken as a lack of commitment to fully learn the cultures under scrutiny, if not as sheer disrespect, undermining what is advertised as a corrective enterprise to the historical unevenness between North and South. Simply put, through a metaphor advanced by some critics, why can't Inter-American Studies be a Trojan horse for US academic imperialism, leading to the co-optation of alterity into the hegemonic discourse, in a sort of intellectual melting-pot process, to resort to another familiar metaphor. This would be a case in which Inter-American Studies would act to revalidate consent within the US hegemonic regime in the Americas.

... Or can Inter-American Studies be counter-hegemonic?

Notwithstanding its more and less obvious flaws and historical vices, for someone following relatively close the 'inter-American turn,' a lot remains still to be seen, and a finer brand of scholarship not necessarily out of the horizon. Understanding the "intricate interdependencies," as Janice Radway put it, not as mere points of connection or similarities but as contradictions will allow for an epistemology based on difference that is fundamental to criticize the power relations at stake in the Americas. Comparativism is enabling in deconstructing the typologies, ideological agendas and the narratives and methodologies of linearity and symmetry the national framework builds upon, thereby

¹² Take as examples the Introduction to Caroline Levander and Robert Levine's *Hemispheric American Studies* and the discussion between Winfried Fluck and Robyn Wiegman in *New Literary History* 42(3) (Summer 2011), 365-407.

avoiding the reification of the objects of study and the containment of conflict.¹³ This would also move beyond models of criticism of US imperialism and US hegemony (often subscribed by Latin American critics) which bog down to the binary model oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized and result in the erasure of difference and contradiction all the same. Methodologies based on incomparability and incommensurability and on intersecting axes of space and time figure as Inter-American Studies' alternative proposals.

Caroline Levander and Lawrence Levine (2008), for instance, defend what they call a hemispheric perspective based on the intersection of the axes of chronology and geography to evince disjunctions and the unevenness of power entailed in North/South relations (p. 6). Susan Gillman's notion of a 'disjunctive comparability' shows similar concerns: she makes a case for a comparative study based on disruptive difference instead of conciliating parallelism or similarity: For a scholarship that is able to use incomparability as its critical strategy comes close to the idea of linguistic and cultural untranslatability (2008: 335). Gilman suggests that, as in the practice of translation, we identify and explore "those events, figures, times and places that are characterized by a reluctance, resistance or refusal to compare" (*ibidem*), as in cases of 'mistranslation.' We should therefore, she further argues, resort to incomparability as a critical tool, for difference, she concludes, can be a lot more insightful than similarity or repetition.

But perhaps the most radical theorist in this vein is (another US based) Latin Americanist, Doris Sommer, who has been working for a good while on how to approach radical cultural difference, or what she calls the rhetoric of particularism. Sommer underlines the need for a distance in reading trained in "modesty and respect" (1999: xi), meaning that the reader must refrain from the temptation of mastery when faced with cultural difference. Difference should be taken as a value in itself, being a strategy of the subaltern writer to construct his/her own agency – and authority; without those limits imposed on the text "the imperial I would fill up more space" (*ibidem*: xii). Thus, Sommer argues that "[a]bsences [in meaning] can also [...] release readers from the exorbitant (and unethical) but usually unspoken assumption that we should know the

¹³ A comparative analysis of slavery is a good case in point. If one understands slavery as an institution, it will be locked within national boundaries; as a consequence, one will remain distracted from the necessary relations created by the slave traffic and the circulation of racism, for instance.

Other well enough to speak for him or her.” (1999: x) She is critical of the idea that the act of reading must be a democratic exercise in the sense of “a natural and unitary spirit of the people,” arguing that it makes one forget that “a war of positions” can also be democratic (*ibidem*: xi) in challenging the reader to face conflict and contradiction; by this means, the reader is trained in negotiation, instead of resorting to mechanisms that “forc[e] sameness on others” (*ibidem* 3). This perception of the other Americas’ as different is not the same as posing them as the Other of the US. It is rather the expression of a new brand of comparativism that takes power relations as the basis of the relation: one must bear in mind that while being a nation among nations (to resist exceptionalism), the US is *not* a nation *like* other nations – at least certainly not in the wide context of Central and South America, where you have such impoverished nations such as Haiti, Guatemala, or Mexico, to name a few.

Conclusions

What remains at stake is therefore how American Studies will use the opportunity of the ‘transnational turn.’ Will American Studies write its own history and assume a counter-hegemonic position? Certainly what casts a shadow on the possibilities of a fair dialogue is what Quijano termed the coloniality of power, and Mignolo reworked as the coloniality of knowledge. But Mignolo also points towards the invention of new epistemic, rhetorical, and political forms of agency. Maybe a radical inversion in the critical perspective able to accept alterity as such is what could make a real difference if Inter-American Studies is to become a true tool for power adjustment: the South looking North and speaking its own voice and the North engaging in negotiation, instead of co-opting Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

As Doris Friedensohn presciently put it at the break of the transnational turn, “transnational American Studies asks us to relinquish privileged ownership of our field. It asks us to reject as our due the inequities of material resources for pursuing this common work; to acknowledge the role of these inequities in the production and reproduction of knowledge; and to collaborate with foreign colleagues – without playing Big Sister or Big Brother – as partners in an enterprise unfolding beyond our control.” (1996: 183)

In the present battle the US wages to maintain its hegemony, the expansion of these endeavors onto the Americas poses as many opportunities as perils. We may finally ask, glossing on the title of one of last year's keynote addresses at the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies – Maria Irene Ramalho's "Who Owns American Studies? Old and New Approaches to Understanding the United States of America" (2011) –,¹⁴ if it all sums up to who owns *Inter-American* studies this time. The biggest challenge may be how to bring the logics of difference, or alterity, to bear on the workings and dynamics of hegemony without it being engulfed by the hegemonic structures and discourses.

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¹⁴ I am referring to Ramalho's keynote address to the 32nd Meeting of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies, held at the University of Coimbra, on May 12th, 2011.

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