

Some Roles of American Studies Overseas Today

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As a sophomore at Amherst College in 1955-56, when I was required to take an American Studies course, I was interested in the "Problems of Civilization" that we were asked to consider and write about *The New Deal: Revolution or Evolution?*, *The Meaning of Jacksonian Democracy*, *Slavery as a Cause of the Civil War* (cf. Bate and Frank). But I was more interested *then* in English Literature. I did not think of myself as a student of American Literature and culture until I had a small awakening one day on a bus in New York City a few years later when it occurred to me that I could never know as much about the literature of Britain as I could about the literature of my own country.

I agreed with T.S. Eliot that the "historical sense" requires us first to write with our "own generation" in our "bones" (1828), but I knew that my bones were American as I looked at the majestic Hudson River as the bus headed south from my neighbourhood, Washington Heights, to Morningside Heights and Columbia University: landscape of the early Republic. As the grandson of Lithuanian immigrants on my father's side and German immigrants on my mother's, I felt a sense of gratitude to America for giving my family a homeland; and I was determined *then* to become as American as I could be. Exile and expatriation were privileges, it seemed to me, of the landed and established, the sons and daughters of the American Revolution, the highly gifted, and oppressed (Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright). Besides, America had just spearheaded an Allied victory over Germany and Japan: its Flying Fortresses had dominated the skies; its young men had shed blood on foreign soil to protect the Wilsonian legacy of self-determination, the basic tenets of constitutional democracy, and international law. It was, in the words of Henry Luce, "the American Century" (Brogan 606). "Why," I asked myself on that fateful bus ride downtown, "would I want to study English literature at a time when 'The Star-Spangled Banner' was replacing 'God Save the Queen' as an inspiring anthem for nations emerging from the ruins of fascism, war, genocide, and holocaust?"

I have no doubt, looking back, that my incidental revelation was part of a larger impulse — both in America and overseas — to recognize the importance, the empire status really, of America in the immediate post World War Two period. I felt and understood at a personal level a change that was taking place in the world at that time; the Americanization of Europe and parts of Asia, a shift from a British and Euro-dominated world (with its legacy of colonial rule) to one of American economic and cultural hegemony (particularly in the area of popular culture: blue-jeans and James Dean). President Truman's signing of the Fulbright Act on August 1, 1946, the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, and the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 (*Terms and Conditions* 1993, ii) were at once symbols of America's new cultural and educational role in world affairs and political attempts (largely successful) to expand that role. American Studies and the study of American *civilization* came of age in the post-Hiroshima and post-Yalta period as an expression of America's confidence in itself (its institutions and *way of life*), its desire to spread its influence, and as part of the world's recognition that it was important and perhaps even beneficial to understand something about the new world: its democratic political stability, technological sophistication, and educational excellence; its expanding markets (domestic and international), efficiency, imagination, and openness.

The study of American literature and culture advanced inevitably a view of America that was consistent with America's new role in world affairs. Indeed, the idea of America's relative "newness" and related ideas were set against Europe's "oldness" and obsolescence in the aftermath of World War Two. Myths of innocence and origin were in the air. America was described as a "virgin land" and "second Eden" by its critics and historians; the "frontier," as *interpreted* by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *became* the crucible of liberal democracy. The emergence of American Studies (and, within it, or next to it, the study of American literature) was part of the celebration of American-style democracy after V-E and V-J days, after the defeat of two ultra-nationalist states that had been committed, in one form or other, to ethnic and racial "purity." America celebrated its immigrant legacy and the apparent success of the "melting pot" in this post-war period; and *E Pluribus Unum* (held firmly in the teeth of the eagle) became, in effect, the national motto.

Those of us who were attending lectures in Amherst's College Hall (itself an emblem of mid-nineteenth century righteousness) did not doubt that we would participate in a life of "discovery" and expansion that would replicate, in some way, Whitman's celebration in "Passage to India" of Columbus's voyage.

The mediaeval navigators rise before me,

The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise,

Something swelling in humanity now like the sap

of the earth in spring,

The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.

And who art thou sad shade?

Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,

With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,

Spreading around with every look of thine a

golden world,

Enhuing it with gorgeous hues. (16)

If we had reservations about the promises of the post-war boom (and we did, of course), they took the form of apprehensions about giving up individuality and selfhood in the name of corporate enterprise and a pre-established, assigned family destiny; but we did not doubt that our rebellion against the nuclear family (a microcosm of the society as a whole) would lead to some kind of creative self-realization.

The movies, plays, and prose of the period (family drama) supported this view: *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Member of the Wedding*, to give a few examples. This sense of what I recently have come to call "creative alienation" was reinforced by the monumental importance given to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by the leading American critics of the post-war era. Their celebration of *Huck Finn* combined what was still viable of the 1930s legacy *after* the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 (the betrayal of the Left) with a positive reading of escapist tendencies, especially as those figures representing a movement from restraint towards freedom were associated with the American West. This was a "quiet," but deep, resistance on the part of my 1950s contemporaries to the self-congratulatory tendencies of America in the post-war period; and it reflected, as well, the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis, a spin-off, we might say of the Nazi era, the immigration of displaced academics and intellectuals (many Jews) to the United States as refugees and survivors. But this resistance did not seriously challenge and call into question America's role in the post-war period. Even the "Beat" movement, the most obvious cultural challenge to America in the pre-Viet Nam era, was only a blip on the national radar screen; and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* did not so much threaten America's middle class as titillate it.

Needless to say, a great deal has changed in America and the world since my undergraduate days. To be a successful American no longer means exclusively, as it did for my generation, to cultivate a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) life-style: to enter the Halls of Ivy and the canyons of Wall Street (cf. Pfaff). America is now a much more multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-national society. We might even say that it is more powerful, relative to the world, in the wake of the collapse of the "former" Soviet Union and the Gulf War, but

this is no longer a sufficient index of national greatness at the end of the twentieth century, if not history.

In a real sense, America and the Soviet Union created (and exaggerated) each other's stature during the period of the Cold War. The Cold War served to conceal (or override) national weaknesses; and its demise leaves each side with its weaknesses exposed, the former Soviet Union more damaged than any Soviet hand or Kremlinologist could have predicted; the US uncertain about its hegemonic status as empire: whether it possesses it, whether it wants to possess it (uncertain about how to act in either case).

Despite George Bush's efforts to assert a New World Order at the end of the Gulf War in the eleventh hour of his Presidency, with America in the cockpit, everyone knew (including the American voting public) that America needed more to compete and cooperate in economic terms on a global scale than it needed to dominate militarily. America needed, first, to balance its budget and correct its imbalance of trade; and it could not attend to these items without reducing the cost of its military. The end of the Cold War makes America both more and less powerful: more powerful than its old adversary, but less necessary as a mega-power in the world. Other wealthy nations can rush in where angels fear to tread, particularly Germany and Japan, once their governments sort out appropriate military missions in the post Cold War era. These tortuous efforts of national self-definition are going on right now. The rise of the European (EC) and Asian economies (especially Germany and Japan, along with the Dragons) over the past two decades have been, of course, the most powerful forces affecting America's perception of itself as well as the world's perception of America. Where my generation saw the Americanization of Europe and parts of Asia, the present generation sees *the Asianization of America and Hispanicization* in terms at once observable and atmospheric (Michael Woo's political candidacy for Mayor of Los Angeles highlights this point [cf. *South China Morning Post*, April 11, 1993]).

Even as overseas students flock to America for advanced training, they recognize that they bring, in the main, more discipline and a stronger work ethic with them; they recognize that they are taking more advantage of America's wonderful educational opportunities than Americans themselves, and they believe as well (I have heard many such opinions in Hong Kong) that better opportunities await them at home once they are "returned" and that, furthermore, they find American society and culture to be often incoherent and violent.

The recent destruction of the Branch Davidian in Waco, Texas establishes America, once again, as a country where the forces of law and lawlessness act out a scenario of fantasy and violence that transgresses the boundaries of reason; and these distortions compromise our good name and damage our image as it is transmitted world-wide (CNN, BBC World Service). Visitors are puzzled also

by the apparent illiteracy and innumeracy of a country that is, in fact, training them at the highest levels in physics, medicine, engineering, and other technical fields. These students (and America-watchers) may fail to understand that "falling" standards in the lower grades and high schools are a consequence (perhaps a temporary one) precisely of America's effort (however ambivalent in some cases) to absorb new populations, new languages, new perceptions of learning itself.

As much as anything and in ways that still defy full comprehension, the Viet Nam war changed America's perception of itself, more really than the world's perception of America. If America "lost" the war, it was a loss everyone understood. It was a matter of will rather than might; and I would say that it was precisely the "loss" in Viet Nam that led to a gain in national consciousness, a gain that offsets (potentially) many of the negatives that I have enumerated so far. It was no longer possible *after* Viet Nam for Americans, including American academics, researchers, scholars, and intellectuals to be complacent about myths of national innocence; to ignore questions of race, class and gender. The analysis, critique, and opposition to the war in Viet Nam mobilized a new generation of critics (including critics of American literature and culture) who would look closely at claims about the frontier and who would find "violence" (Slotkin), where there had been "freedom"; who would find poverty where there had been affluence (Harrington); who would find the subjection of women where there had been emancipation (Gilligan, Tavis); and who would find colonialism, even alleged genocide, where there had been "discovery/encounter." The post-Viet Nam era forced reevaluations of the American experience along these lines; and a new generation of African-American scholars and scholars of African American experience — Houston Baker, Jr., John Pope Franklin, Henry L. Gates, Jr., Michelle Wallace, and Eugene Genovese, to name a few — brought powerful new tools of analysis to bear upon the crippling legacy of the "peculiar institution." These progressive voices, if we may call them that, found their opposite in the Post-Viet Nam era in the rise of certain neo-conservative tendencies: a criticism of post-Modernist and deconstructive aesthetics (*The New Criterion*); renewed claims for the integrity of the family (cf. Broder; Wolf).

One area where America has remained substantially unchanged for my parents' generation, my generation, and the post-Viet Nam and post-Cold War generations is its "openness" to new immigrants; and I think that this constant of American life can provide a blue-print for change to set and correct some of the fractures that my cultural x-ray has revealed.

Even as America has lost some of its world-power and some of the world's respect in certain areas, it has remained, perhaps paradoxically, "a torch" and beacon for poor, displaced, and oppressed peoples from all over the world: Haitians, Indians, Central Americans, Russian Jews, Vietnamese, Hong Kong

Chinese, Cuban, Filipinos, and others. America remains "a torch" for legal and illegal immigrants because of her relative political stability, relative commitment to human rights, and openness in all spheres of life (a willingness to reinvent itself in every generation, a costly and inefficient commitment in the short run, but our best hope over the centuries) including rapid educational and economic advancement in one generation for many, if not all. These new immigrants will make even more urgent the process of cultural reevaluation that has been underway since the 1960s and they themselves, in what they bring to America, can provide a blue-print for change.

When Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian President Boris Yeltsin agreed upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, they effectively ended the Cold War. The immediate effect was to elevate the power of the United States; but, as I have suggested, the longer term effect has been to call for a redefinition of America in the post-Cold War era. At the same time, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent ethnic-racial-territorial conflicts within the former Soviet Union and its spheres of influence (most notably, Yugoslavia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) have created a refugee problem that may constitute the world's most pressing task at the present time and which underscores the pervasive demographic displacements (willing and unwilling) of the past two decades. In helping to meet this challenge, in finding ethical and practical ways to absorb even more "foreign" populations, America can reassert its historic mission and, at the same time, reconceive that mission. At just the moment when America is haunted and shadowed by a "declinist" attitude, it can reilluminate its history by looking closely at the legacy of The Statue of Liberty, if I may be allowed to reduce this complicated set of arguments to one national symbol.

Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (1883) still speaks to America's and the world's situation:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door." (480)

Although Emma Lazarus wrote this poem in response to the plight of Jews who had fled the pogroms of Russia, the poem revitalized, in time, "the old eighteenth-century idea of America as an asylum" (Higham: 480). This poem did not become immediately well-known. It owes its popularity and proleptic significance largely to Louis Adamic, a Yugoslav-American author and journalist, who used the poem to launch a crusade "to elevate the status of immigrant groups and to propagate an eclectic sense of American nationality."

(Primer 481). It seems appropriate at this time, almost fateful, that the popularizer of "The New Colossus" should have been Yugoslavian, for no part of the world better defines the need for the transcendence of ancient loyalties when these loyalties lead to "ethnic cleansing" and other forms of inhumanity. And we can expect that soon some of these new exiles and immigrants will look towards the "mighty woman with a torch," the "Mother of Exiles," and, when they do, I hope America will admit as many as possible with grace and intelligence.

America cannot, of course, stand alone in this effort. There needs to be an internationally funded agency (alas, another one) to gather information, demographic, resources, medical, about the displacement and movement of peoples, the possibilities for humane and economically sound resettlement. New technologies make this formidable task possible, at least at a theoretical level. This agency needs to go beyond the work of all existing agencies (UN and otherwise) in the actual settlement of peoples. As formidable as such a task may be, there is evidence (Workforce 2000 data, *IHT*, April 21, 1993) that some major economies will need, in fact to "import" people from other regions. Perhaps those who are displaced and those who seek workers can come to more harmonious terms in the future. By responding to these "endangered people" (Hoagland), America will continue to fulfil its historic mission to become, as I see it, the world's first *one-world* country, a blue-print for other nations.

These newest immigrants will add their cultural strengths to America's weaknesses: family coherence; the work ethic; a devotion to immediate reality; renewed discipline in the classroom (the dispossessed cannot afford to be idle); and they will insist, I hope, on preserving, within America's commitment to openness and multiplicity of belief as protected by the Constitution and other "sacred" Republican documents, their hyphenated identities. If they try to "melt" too willingly into the American pot, they will be reminded by critics, who came of age after the 1960s, that *cultural pluralism* has replaced *E Pluribus Unum* as a slogan for the 1990s. Like all slogans, it can oversimplify and serve other agendas (Political Correctness); but that is another matter. The newest immigrants, some of the Bosnian, Croat, and Serb children who have become "homeless," will add their voices, in time, to other new American voices; and, in so doing, they will put more pressure on America to become a truly global society. America can become, as I have suggested in this role, a model for all nations in the twenty-first century.

As economic boundaries disappear, more and more of the world's have-nots will seek their fortunes in affluent countries; and the wealthy nations will have to invest in the economies of poorer nations even as they remain willing to open their borders. As Bill Clinton says in his inaugural address: "To renew America, we must meet challenges abroad as well as at home. There is no longer clear division today between what is foreign and what is domestic...." (*IHT*, Jan. 21,

1993, 3) Some of these pressures will lead to conflict, even violence (as in the L.A. riots of 1992, the conflict between Koreans and African-Americans); but a stronger society may emerge in time. In the struggle to accept new immigrants of all persuasions and differences, America will have to address again and again its failure to come to terms with the African-American legacy. If it cannot come to terms with the legacy of slavery and racism, then America's decline will be irreversible; but I have some hope that America's irreversible heterogeneity in all areas of its social existence (including a redefinition of appropriate sex and gender distinctions) will lead, in time (but how much do we have?) to a redemption of our national sin (Franklin). These issues will require the attention of every academic and individual concerned with America, and I hope I have provided a diagnosis (X-ray), partial, to be sure, that will make possible some constructive criticism and research: *blue-prints* for American Studies.

When I started teaching overseas in 1983, a journey that has taken me from Turkey to Malaysia and Hong Kong, with academic tours of many other countries (India, Korea, Thailand, People's Republic of China, Philippines, and Taiwan), I thought I would be exporting useful American ideas and ideals. Little did I know that I would become "globalized" in the process and that this redefinition of my own identity might serve as a guide for a reexamination of America in this and other studies. I left Amherst College in 1959, a year after my class (I had taken 1956-57 as a *Wanderjahr*, an augury of a life to come, I now see), with its motto in mind: *Terras Irradiant* ("let us enlighten the world"); but it has turned out that the world has enlightened me, insofar as I can be enlightened.

The education of each generation turns out to be an exploration of that education itself, its generational imprint, its retrospective meaning. In the end, one's education becomes an item of history, a spot and frieze of time, if you will, that allows one to comprehend one's moment in time. People have been *somewhere* to know *where they are*. The process of discovery goes on, of course: of one's self, one's generation, one's country.

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