Journal of American Studies of Turkey
15 (2002) : 1-8

Introduction: Teaching American Studies past, present and future

Laurence Raw

This is a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies in Turkey* devoted to issues of teaching American Studies. I believe that it is important to focus on this subject for two reasons - first, that to date there has been very little material appearing on the subject in this country; and second, because I do believe that in the current socio-political climate all teachers, whether in the United States or elsewhere, should not only be concerned about what they are teaching under the umbrella of 'American Studies', but more significantly about *why* they are teaching it. Are their main objectives to increase students' knowledge of America, its history and its current place in the world, or are they trying to go beyond studying the target culture and focus instead on inter- or cross-cultural issues? These are the two main points that will be addressed in this issue.

In a recent issue of *US Society and Values* published by the US Information Agency, George Essen observes that during the 1990s there was "an unprecedented growth in international/area studies at home and American studies programs around the world" (Essen, 1996: 1). This was particularly true of countries within the former Communist bloc, where "the implementation of democratic ideas, institutions and governance became a prerequisite to economic restructuring". One of the ways to implement such ideas was through American Studies programs, which sought to transfer "American knowledge and know-how to every corner of the globe" (Essen, 1996: 2). However this was not perceived as an experiment in colonialism, similar in purpose to what the British tried to introduce into Indian or African educational institutions during the days of Empire: American Studies was designed to "provide unique opportunities to open and expand intellectual horizons"(2).

Do American Studies programs, either in Eastern or Central Europe or elsewhere manage to fulfill this objective? In the same issue of *US Society and Values*, Stephen J.Whitfield insisted that while the task of bringing "American knowledge and know-how to every corner of the globe" might be favored by the State Department, it might not be welcomed by students in other countries. He suggested instead that there should be regular consultations between teachers to determine not only what is being studied in a particular context, but more importantly *why* it is being studied. He quotes the example of multiculturalism - a hot topic in the US where "some [ethnic] heritages merit less celebration than others"(Whitfield, 1996: 9). In Romania, however, the idea of multiculturalism was understood very differently:

> There, an American Studies professor had conveyed the severity of the Ceauescu [*sic*] dictatorship by

> translating Frederick Douglass's autobiography into Romanian. Its readers were thus able to infer Communist economic mismanagement, because the meat rations which Douglass was given as a slave were superior to what Romanians were allotted before 1989 (Whitfield, 1996: 10).

One way to sustain this process of consultation is through regular conferences. In 1998 a conference took place in Poland on "Teaching American Studies In Eastern And Central Europe", involving participants from all countries within the region (Turkey excepted) as well as American guests. One Hungarian participant observed that two of the major themes of the conference - the image of America in Europe and the teaching of American Studies in a specific Central/Eastern European context - "created most commentary" from speakers and listeners alike. However, he also suggested that while the conference was useful in terms of bringing these issues to the fore, there needed to be a great deal more work done, in terms of research and publication, before any sustainable improvement could be achieved:

> There is a willingness to communicate that cannot be satisfied in the form of conference questions or informal chatting, but would require panels of interest distinguished and an intensive use of group work where the leader, a coordinator possibly, could find out and collect ideas on for instance the areas of teaching covered, the strategies that have proved successful, recurring problems that need amendment, kinds of cooperation possible among departments, the programs of summer university courses favored, etc. (Zofia, 1998).

The first essay in this collection tries to address at least one of these issues - the problems experienced when teaching concepts such as multiculturalism and/or feminism. Helena Maragou's "American Studies and Gender Issues In An International Classroom" describes her experiences of teaching a class of three men — a white South American, a New Yorker, and a Greek — and seven women — an African American, two Greek Americans and four Greeks at the American College in Athens. Her course comprised a series of novels by Wharton, Morrison, McCullers, Erdrich and Mukherjee amongst others. Evidently most of the so-called "ethnic" texts were enthusiastically received by the students, as they helped them to gain insights into the roots of their own experience of marginalization within Greek society. Similarly the students admitted that studying these novels gave them a greater understanding of the connections between femininity, language and culture - particularly the ways in which "woman" is constructed in different contexts for different ideological purposes. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Maragou's article, however, is her admission that despite the feminist content of her course, most students seemed to be firmly against the idea of a women's studies program being introduced into the academic curriculum. Maragou attributes this to the belief - shared by many of them - that the term "feminism" represents an attempt to essentialize gender difference (by promoting female worth) instead of stressing the cultural construction of gender. I would agree with this in

part; but I would also argue that perhaps the notion of 'women's studies' - just like that of multiculturalism - represents something very different in a context which, like that of the Turkish Republic, is still overwhelmingly patriarchal. As Maragou suggests, the discipline is deconstructed and reinterpreted each time it crosses cultural borders. She also proposes that the idea of "America" provides the ideal ground for the interplay of multicultural forces. This may be true, but what emerges from her article is that this version of "America" is one almost entirely constructed by literary/canonical texts. While students might be free to criticize individual authors, they are nonetheless exposed to the kind of humanist education which has been one of the strategies employed by western nations - particularly Britain and America - to promote awareness of and support for their ways of life.

My ex-colleague Mary Louise Hill's response to Maragou's article recounts her experiences of teaching American feminism in Turkey. The students seemed equally essentialist in their views; this, Hill believes, has been shaped both by their experiences of studying American culture and by their identities as Turks. Such views prompted her to consider why she was teaching American culture at all - was it because it was fundamentally "better" than other cultures, or were there other ideological forces at work? Hill wonders whether teaching American culture in the Turkish context only serves to polarize existing concepts of race, gender or nation (the west vs. the rest). She concludes on a more optimistic note; like Maragou she believes that the idea of "America" can provide a suitable means for discussing particular issues such as multiculturalism or feminism. However, this can only be successful if there is an equal focus on the American classroom - in other words for American teachers (and those who have had direct experience of America) to be willing to criticize themselves and to consider the ideological forces influencing their approaches to teaching the discipline. Perhaps greater attention needs to be paid to the relationship between liberal humanism, the literature curriculum and westernization - particularly in non-western contexts.

My article on the experiences of Fulbrighters and other foreign visitors to the Turkish Republic tries to make this clear. I suggest that at the outset American Studies departments were set up as alternatives to English Literature Departments, with local academics who had been brought up in the liberal humanist tradition. Even today that tradition still persists in certain departments, despite the influx of other critical movements which seek to deconstruct it (e.g. postmodernism). What has happened in several cases is that postmodernism has been seamlessly absorbed into the liberal humanist model, based on the belief that it constitutes the best of western literary culture and should thus constitute part of an American literature curriculum. Foreign academics working in the Turkish Republic might thus be faced with an impossible task - despite their best efforts to deconstruct or criticize their own cultures, they might nonetheless find that their work has been accommodated - particularly at the departmental level - into a westernization paradigm (we need to know what you think is wrong with your own country, so as to understand it better). If this is the case, can a Fulbrighter make any "difference" to the way American Studies is taught abroad? Ken Rosen's article on his experiences in Bulgaria and Egypt might provide a partial answer. At the University of Sofia he discovered that the students had an apparently inexhaustible appetite for what he describes as 'American kitsch', including the works of the Beat Generation or the work of Allen

Ginsberg. Rosen himself preferred to teach older texts; but often found himself struggling against what appeared to a rigid Bulgarian curriculum. He experienced much the same in Egypt – apparently students proved reluctant to respond to his American instincts to "loosen things up", even though their opinions changed as his teaching program developed.

But perhaps Fulbrighters (as well as other foreign visitors) can make more difference - particularly if they become aware of hitherto neglected aspects of American foreign policy. The next article "American Impact On Turkish Social Life 1945-65" written by Aylin Yalçın at Ege University, Izmir, focuses on how America sought to strengthen its influence in the Turkish Republic in the post-1945 period. This was achieved both through direct means - through financial aid provided by the Marshall Plan - but through indirect means (books, magazines, movies, etc.) The article quotes from a locally published periodical *Türk-Anglo-Amerikan Postası* [Turk-Anglo-American Post], edited by Turks which purported to introduce western culture to Turkish readers, and Turkish culture to western readers. However it was soon discovered that westerners were not particularly interested in the magazine; consequently it became a vehicle for promoting (and even extolling) the virtues of American culture. The implications of this for today's teacher of American Studies are immense. When considering how the idea of 'America' has been constructed in a particular context, we should realize that it has been created by locally produced as well as foreign produced materials. If this is the case, perhaps we need to reconsider the familiar globalization/American argument of local cultures being 'swamped' by an influx of foreign goods. Secondly, I think that perhaps American Studies curricula should be expanded to include texts produced in the local as well as the American context - including translations, magazines or newspapers. While comparing American texts with local texts has been a feature of most programs, I would like to see texts such as the *Türk-Anglo-Amerikan Postası* being included as a staple part of academic curricula. This would not only help foreign visitors understand what "America" means in different contexts, but also help students to understand that "America' is not necessarily a "foreign" culture, but part of their own socio-historical heritage.

Turning away from the Turkish Republic, Diana Yankova's "American Culture Studies: Themes and Methodology" offers an example of how the discipline was taught at the New Bulgarian University, Sofia. Although not an essay *per se*, Yankova's course description gives a step-by-step account of how an entire semester's program was planned, with a case study of one unit within it. What I find most interesting is that students are expected not only to read widely, but that their focus of attention is almost exclusively on the foreign culture. Only at the end of the unit, when they are expected to have acquired sufficient knowledge, are they encouraged to compare aspects of American cultural life with their own cultures. Whilst it might appear that Yankova seeks to fulfill George Essen's objective of promoting American know-how abroad, I think we have to realize that many country studies programs are only considered "academic" if students learn about the foreign culture rather than engaging in intercultural comparisons of their own. Otherwise why should they be doing "*American*" Studies rather than *Intercultural* Studies? This may shed new light on Helena Maragou's assertion that the idea of "America" provides a suitable forum for discussion of

multiculturalism or other pressing issues. As a teacher of *American* Studies, maybe she is expected to do this.

This was certainly the case with Sandy Feinstein when she spent a year teaching American Literature in Syria. For at least one course, she had to teach from a book of prescribed texts to a group of students who were not intrinsically motivated to read. She is disarmingly honest in her admission that she had no idea whether her approaches were successful or not, her pass rate was no greater than that of her colleagues, while those students who confided in her were perhaps not exactly altruistic in their motives. On the other hand, she appears to have enjoyed the experience of her diploma class, where she was given the freedom to teach what she wanted, and where she encouraged students to make cultural comparisons of their own. In view of what has been discussed in this introduction, Feinstein's essay is as interesting for what it leaves out as what it includes. I would love to have known how "multiculturalism" is perceived in the Syrian context, and whether this affects the way in which American Studies (or American Literature) is taught. Moreover, although she refers to the fact that students were prompted to engage in cultural "negotiation", she does not tell us the outcome. Did their views of America change? And to what extent did this affect their perception of their own cultures? Perhaps more attention needs to be spent on student response rather than the teacher/scholar making assumptions as to whether their work was successful or not.

Stacilee Ford's article on teaching American Studies in Hong Kong goes some way to answering this requirement. Unlike the other articles in this volume, she lets her students speak, quoting extensively from their written work on so-called "McDonaldization" of Hong Kong. I must say I found this article fascinating; in a country only recently liberated from British rule, and currently under Chinese protection, it would appear that American culture still dominates the students' lives. Ford is convinced that, far from being colonized by it, her students use American culture in a variety of ways; it helps to form their identity, as well as enabling them to form new critical perspectives. She observes that while students since 9/11 have become less enthusiastic about "things American", there has nonetheless been a significant rise in enrollments for the American Studies program, which might suggest that it offers the chance to develop new critical perspectives. Once again, however, there appears to be an over-reliance on foreign material - e.g. theoretical perspectives formulated in America. I would like to see more locally produced material being introduced into courses, of the kind surveyed in "American Impact On Turkish Social Life".

Perhaps this might be useful in contexts where the supply of material from America, or from the west, is often restricted. In an extended book review section, practicing teachers from Turkey and elsewhere focus on American Studies materials past and present. In the first review, I look at a recent book emerging from teachers working in the Czech Republic on Intercultural Studies. Although intended for learners of English rather than undergraduate students, the volume nonetheless offers a useful menu of activities for those interested in adopting a comparative perspective. Cancı's review looks at a recently produced text, the *Oxford Guide To British and American Culture*, which provides a valuable resource for anyone wanting to find out basic information about both countries.

The final three reviews look at recently produced texts about America. Russell Johnson criticizes Valdas Anelauskas's *Discovering America As It Is* for its failure to focus more closely on the difficulties experienced by a Lithuanian immigrant to the country. Kaldip Kuwahara's review of Azade Seyhan's *Writing Outside The Nation* praises the work, but leaves some fascinating questions unanswered. The author is congratulated on having shown how the Bhabbaesque "third ear" can expand the reader's capacity to listen and transcend limitations of hyphenation and hybridity to create new meanings that open up possibilities of "community and culture beyond boundaries". However, I would love to know how students - whether in America or elsewhere - could be encouraged to develop their "third ear'", particularly in contexts where hybridity means something different. Finally Vernon Pedersen takes us back to where we began by looking at connections between the United States and Europe. One of the volumes surveyed focuses on recent work published in the Romanian context on American Studies. Perhaps these kinds of volumes ought to be made more available to teachers, as examples of locally produced materials.

While this issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* cannot hope to cover all these issues arising from teaching American Studies, it does try to focus on two main themes; the image of America in different regions of the world, and the problems and strategies of teaching American Studies in contexts where that image often provokes an adverse reaction amongst students. It will certainly not offer any hard and fast solutions to these issues, but perhaps it will help to promote further dialog about them amongst American Studies practitioners in different contexts.

Works Cited

Essen, George (1996). "The United States And The World: The Changing Role Of International Education". *US Society And Values*, October: 1-5.

Whitfield, Stephen J. (1996). "Ethnic Diversity In American Studies". *US Society And Values*, October: 6-11.

Zofia, Kovacs Agnes (1998). "Teaching American Studies in Central and Eastern Europe Conference: The Participants' Feedback". Internet address http://klio.umcs.lublin.pl/users/ptsazlka/Paassite/feedback.htm, 2nd November 2003.