Journal of American Studies of Turkey
9 (1999) : 33-52.

Alienating American Studies: A European Perspective

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In matters of theory and understanding, it is not uncommon for outsiders and spectators to gain a sharper and deeper insight into the actual meaning of what happens to go on before or around them than would be possible for the actual actors or participants, entirely absorbed as they must be in the events.

Hannah Arendt (qtd. in Young-Bruehl xi)

The pun in the title refers quite obviously to the need for an outside, therefore alien in the sense of foreign, influence in the field of American Studies. Indeed what is called "American Studies" outside America is simply quite different from the object that bears the same name in the US; an object which it is not easy to define within the American or rather United States context itself. In fact, in some countries there is no such equivalent, and only a translation or retranslation into English makes a comparative discussion possible. This "alienating" process is akin to what often goes by the name of "decentering" or the play of "differences" but the approach chosen here is not Derridean.

In Britain or Ireland there is, at first sight, no semantic difficulty with American Studies, nor in Germany where *Amerikastudien* is a perfect "calque" (semantic fit) of the expression in English. In France the concept of American Studies is itself an object of debate and specialists in the field are actually split along various lines: literature, history, social sciences.

This article focuses on the present state of American Studies, ignoring the issue of its birth in the context of the Cold War. It starts rather from the, arguably debatable, premise that the Cold War as such is over, and that American Studies as practised by academics is not primarily propaganda for American values or the "American way of life," nor one aspect of American hegemony in the world system. This latter issue should be tackled separately (see Kaenel 1993 and 1996). The issue of "American exceptionalism vs. distinctiveness" is also not the focus of this paper although it figures subliminally in it. Some exceptionalists may indeed be involved in propaganda still but, at least on the theoretical level, they are now a distinct, nearly extinct, minority. I start from the premise that the United States society is indeed different from other societies and therefore worthy of specific study and,

like most of my colleagues in the field, I object to the term “exceptionalism” for it suggests superiority and has historical links with imperialism.

Quite obviously, Americans teaching or studying history or literature or sociology in the US are not necessarily considered to be American Studies specialists, although historians may call themselves Americanists or Europeanists. Literature is not always split along national lines such as British, Irish, Canadian, Indian or American. Clearly most departments of literature in America are organized around the language; and “English lit.” often means “anglophone lit,” to use a word that is more common in Canadian English than in American English. Some of the work carried out in American Studies programs is similar to what is done in history or English, which is in fact, also what often happens in “continental Europe.”

In many departments of English, as they are often called in Europe where the study of the US still takes a back seat to the study of Britain, and where American Studies is a fairly recent import, there is often a division between American and British literature, American and British history—and very little about Canada or Australia. On the other hand, many academics spend their working lives studying one aspect of American life but are not considered as “Americanists.” A specialist of labor practices in the automobile industry with a special focus on America who works in a sociology department will be called a “sociologist,” not an “Americanist” or American Studies specialist.

In some ways the study of America, which, in a country like France, is called the study of American civilization as far as all the non-literary aspects of it are concerned, resembles what is called “area studies” in the English-speaking world. Some topics which may be tackled by political scientists or geographers or economists in the US are researched by “Americanists” in Europe and yet “Americanists” do not cover the whole spectrum of professional interest in the United States. In my university, Université du Maine (le Mans, France)**,** there is an “area studies department” with some courses on the US and in particular US foreign policy; and also courses in “American literature” and “American civilization” within the English department, itself a sub-section of the “foreign language department.” To make matters even more complicated: literature specialists and so-called civilization specialists are generally different people. The word “civilization” was dropped in many places in the United States and is also challenged by some in Europe while others deny its inevitable imperialist and elitist tendencies. This debate is not always . . . civilized.

The objectives of American Studies outside America cannot be the same as those that prevail within the geopolitical entity known as the US. Teaching American Studies in America presupposes a basic familiarity with and knowledge of the culture studied. Outside this geopolitical unit this “familiarity” has to be taught in difficult, prejudice-ripe conditions. Most researchers are also professors and must take into account the level of knowledge of their compatriots when they publish in

their home countries. Obviously some countries, such as Britain, are better informed about America because of their cultural and/or ideological closeness with it. Poland or the Czech Republic are catching up fast with Germany or France but cannot invent the long tradition of exchanges and mutual observation which was broken by communism. France, in spite, but also because, of its recurring feuds with the US, enjoys the sometimes dubious benefits of a long observation of America going back to its colonial adventures, involving St. John de Crèvecoeur, René de Chateaubriand and Alexis de Tocqueville, which makes its cultural dialogue with America rich and complex. One may argue that the French and the Americans love to hate each other but one should not forget the other side of the coin: they hate to love each other too (see Guerlain 1996).

This paper focuses on three major aspects of foreign (here non-American) involvement in the field of American Studies: after pointing out the handicaps and limitations foreign observers have to face and tackle, the chances for renewal and stimulation are analyzed and, in the final section, the issue of globalization and its impact on American Studies is broached.

Foreigners in the field: Handicaps and Limitations

European or Asian Americanists are, by definition, foreign observers of the US, living and working mostly outside the country which they endeavor to analyze, describe, make sense of (if possible) and present to students. Most such observers have been shaped by their culture of origin, and are thus dependent on their national and cultural glasses when viewing the US. E. T. Hall and Clifford Geertz have done valuable work in this field: one is always tempted to project one's points of view onto the people, countries or social phenomena one observes. Some form or other of ethnocentrism may be inescapable. Thus, as E. T. Hall asserts, the French often look for the "center" in many American institutions or even cities, a deceptive situation in L. A. or when using the Internet (*Beyond Culture*). The French are shaped by their culture, culture here meaning their history after the Revolution and the triumph of Jacobin ideas. Eastern Europeans just emerging from communism may be tempted to idealize the West and in particular the United States and be less critical than Americans themselves about some aspects of American life. However, they also undergo cycles of idealization and disappointment like Western Europeans after World War II. For example, after fascism, Italians viewed America with exhilaration which gave way to distrust when left-wing ideas became the norm among intellectuals, to be replaced with a renewed interest with the celebration of American mass culture. Many Germans view America as a rather disorganized, violent country or an anarchistic one as Heinz Ickstadt, the president of the European Association of American Studies (EAAS) between 1996-2000, once said at a symposium in Orléans (Colloque CERCA/GRAAT 1996: "Mode et modes dans la littérature et la culture anglo-

américaine" [Fashion and fashions in Anglo-American literature and culture] September 1996).

Clearly foreign observers of America may come to the study of the US with their black-or pink-tinted glasses and their chips on their shoulders, and offer their students and colleagues a distorted view of their object. Stanley Hoffmann argues as much about the French in the *New York Review of Books* ("Look Back in Anger"). The French, Hoffmann writes, see the US as the country of unfettered capitalism, shrill feminism, political correctness and social unfairness. Of course a lot would have to be said in this context to make sense of these distortions yet here the key factor seems to be misinformation caused by distance. Distance which is not only geographical but also cultural: the information about the US that most people have outside the US is sketchy and often conveyed by TV, not a medium well-known for its objectivity or its depth. To use Vann Woodward's phrase, the US is also a "silver screen" (1) onto which Europeans, like Asians and Africans, may project their hopes, fears and expectations.

Scholars, of course, enjoy more sources of information about the US; they read American papers, magazines, journals and use the Internet to get access to American sites. So, their information gap cannot be as wide as that of most of their compatriots, nor as wide as in the past. Yet it may be argued that since they are shaped by their own culture they cannot avoid projecting their world views onto their intellectual object. In a sense any foreign Americanist is placed in the same dilemma or methodological quandary as an anthropologist. There is therefore a necessity for any researcher to constantly analyze the framework of his or her field of study and to carry out experiments to determine whether he or she is projecting national cultural values onto the observation of America. An upper-middle class liberal sociologist studying industrial workers or teenagers in the ghetto is faced with similar projection problems that have to be included in his or her self-reflexive work about his or her intellectual framework.

Difference and cultural blinders are therefore, in this perspective, two stumbling blocks. Another handicap is the limited possibilities for intellectual and professional exchanges. Professional Americanists in France number between 500 and 600, and most are active in so-called English departments in universities where it is very rare to have more than five or six colleagues doing research in the same field. American Americanists enjoy the stimulation of the environment and multiple opportunities for exchanges with, say, the sociologists, political scientists, literary critics and media specialists whose fields are different but closely related to American Studies. European Americanists, for their part, are organized in national American Studies associations and therefore not condemned to work in "atomized" isolation. Quite often local research groups at the level of each university are devoted to the study of both the US and Britain, which has some positive and also some limiting characteristics (such as reinforcing the prejudice that there is an "Anglo-American" or "Anglo-Saxon" cultural unit with no national

characteristics). There are some exchanges between the various European national associations but they remain rather infrequent and non-institutionalized. The British or German associations enjoy a very good reputation in France but contacts besides the bi-annual EAAS conference are rare.

Non-American Americanists are positioned as anthropologists in their professional work, and whatever their field of research they are involved in some kind of comparative work. This is determined not only by the need to check for cultural projections but also by their audience and their roles as teachers. Thus comparative methodologies are superimposed on the methodologies used to work in a specific field. Literary critics quite often resort to critical tools developed in their language and/or country to analyze American texts; immigration specialists constantly keep in mind the situation of their own country as regards immigration and the way it differs from the American one before they write about the US; film critics in France often use French theoreticians to analyze American movies and quite explicitly prefer the critical tools developed at home to the critical tools generated in the US. Jürgen Habermas is a strong philosophical and political reference among German and left-wing anti-post-modern thinkers in France who view recent developments within the US academy with distrust or despair. This may foster a kind of alienation in relation to the study of the US or maybe a form of decentering which also has some positive aspects on which I now want to dwell.

Foreigners in the field: Chances for renewal and stimulation

"America watchers" are a different breed in Europe; they use different methods and their "local knowledges" vary tremendously from those practised by their American "quasi-colleagues." Yet from many points of view this decentered, peripheral or marginal position of Europeans (but this is also true of Latin Americans, Africans and Asians) is actually a boon not only for the researchers involved in more or less conscious comparative studies, but also for the field of American Studies and therefore for all Americanists.

Louis Dumont, a specialist of India, argues that in order to see one's culture in its unity and specificity, one needs to put it in perspective by contrasting it with other cultures. This is also the gist of what Geertz teaches us. In this sense foreign Americanists are also explicators of their own cultures and providers of different viewpoints for all other Americanists, including American ones. There is, as noted above, a long tradition of French observation of America which has helped Americans make sense of their country. De Tocqueville was, for a while in the post-World War II period, better known in the US than in France where most researchers were Marxists and resented de Tocqueville's liberalism. Charles Dickens and James Bryce had their opinionated views of America and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe his idealizing ones, which encouraged Americans to refine their self-definitions. The need to see one's culture from afar is perceived in the

US, too. American historians in the OAH (Organization of American Historians) now award a prize for the best foreign publication in the field of US history, thus acknowledging the quality of the work done by their colleagues in other countries and often other languages.

Outsiders in the research community are often included in international networks that make their nationality or cultural affiliations somewhat different from those of their compatriots. In effect, researchers are bilingual (even if their English is often more European than American) and bicultural by training. American Americanists sometimes work in Europe and therefore help hybridize and cross-fertilize the observation of the US. Many researchers spend time in American universities as visiting professors or even full professors. All specialists have spent time in US libraries (which are so much better than European ones in every field, especially so in the field of American Studies) and they all devote a major portion of their professional time to reading, listening to or digging American materials. They are therefore good translators of America who may retain an accent but are in a better, more informed position to get beyond the slick and superficial presentations of the US that are so frequent in many media.

In the same way as American specialists of Europe have often enriched or revolutionized the study of some aspects of European life or history, European researchers may have an impact on the study of America in America itself. Robert Paxton played a key role in the study of Vichy in France; Michel Foucault inspired many American thinkers. With the ease of travel and communication we have now moved away from what, in 1958, David Pinkney called "Pinkney's thesis," according to which it was easier for French historians to write about French history because of their easier access to archives. In 1991 Pinkney himself altered his thesis and concluded there was no gap any longer. Modern technology may not account for all the changes but, of course, it plays a major part in this intellectual rapprochement between Europe and America.

Foreign researchers are in major ways in the same position vis-à-vis their American colleagues as minority groups are vis-à-vis mainstream society in the US itself. In the words of Robert Boynton writing about intellectuals, "The quandary of the contemporary black intellectual is how to be both an insider and an outsider at the same time, how to balance the requirements of truly independent thinking with the inherently co-opting demands of mass public culture" (53). This is the quandary that foreign Americanists are constantly caught in. Yet, contrary to many other nations, the United States, as a nation of immigrants, is also defined by its outsiders: all Americans are outsiders or descendants of outsiders and therefore the very core of America is defined by what is outside it. The kind of *Blut und Boden* definition of citizenship, linked to *jus sanguini* has never been strong in the US and even America's many bouts of nativism and racism could never eliminate the dialectical definition of Americanness: the US is both a civic nation and an ethnic one. "The world is here," Walt Whitman said and this is particularly true in

the academy today: students and professors from the whole world are active within US universities, and theories from many areas are adopted and discussed by Americans. Contrary to what happens in other fields—military technology or international relations, for instance—America is not an academic hegemonic power, although some of its adulators or apologists, such as Robert B. Reich (*The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*) and Joseph S. Nye (*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*), may think so.

Some forms of extreme identity politics, which is still deceptively called multiculturalism by its defenders, actually reinforce monoculturalism. If the celebration of difference leads to the demise of what Todd Gitlin defines as "the left-wing of the party of commonality" (*The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* 39) and to the refusal to talk beyond one's own group, be it ethnic, racial or sexual, then this has an impact on the way foreign researchers are welcome or not in the field of American Studies. One does not have to be black to be interested in African American history, jazz, James Baldwin or the writings of H. L Gates; nor does one have to be black to teach African American history, as Gates himself states and shows through his cooperation with many different people, notably with a French research group ("African Diasporas" group in Université de Paris VII) which is mostly made up of white female researchers. Orlando Patterson and Randall Kennedy are two other opponents of this narrowing of perspectives.

The essentialist idea that one would have to be of the right "race," gender or ethnicity to tackle specific issues has echoes of past racialism and sexism. A few professors in the academy in the US seem to have a similar approach. Post-modernism, which has roots in France, may become a kind of badge of "right thinking" in some discourses on American as well as French campuses. On the right, some thinkers seem to resent American imports of French ideas because of their national origin. These imports might be problematic on account of the internal lack of consistency of the system imported, not because of their country of origin. In the so-called "science wars" or Sokal affair (see Sokal "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," and "Transgressing the Boundaries: an Afterword"; Sokal and Bricmont; Guerlain 1999) what Bruno Latour argues (i.e., that truth and science are social constructs; [qtd. in Gross and Levitt; and in Sokal and Bricmont]) is far more significant than the accident of his birth and nationality. In the same way, Foucault can be criticized for his ideas or even a few gross errors (such as supporting Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978; or thinking that to claim that AIDS affects mostly gay people is a form of gay bashing) and not for his Frenchness.

Let me enumerate a few examples to make this clear. Gitlin's critique of Foucault (*The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*) or Sokal's of Lacan (Sokal and Bricmont) are perfectly legitimate in a context of international debate; they do not target an author because of who he or she is and so

cannot be suspected of being monoculturalists or nationalists hiding behind the mask of multiculturalism. Camille Paglia's critique of the same French authors, besides being a show, often borders on the xenophobic ("Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants and Other Academics"; *Sex, Art and American Culture*). The right in America does tend to view with suspicion ideas from overseas, but on the left there are also tendencies to view one's dissidence as an unavoidable vanguard that the whole world will have to emulate (as, for instance, Hillis Miller did at the 1986 MLA Presidential address [qtd. in Bleikasten 409].) I hasten to add that this is often the attitude of trendy intellectuals in France who often become gurus and confuse the development of novel ideas with the setting up of a new cult. (Lacan is a case in point.)

This being said, most professors and intellectuals are quite convinced that thinking is a truly global activity. It is actually erroneous to talk about "American" or "European" or "French" thought, for international networks in all major fields exist and make the national origin of ideas often difficult to track down. When moving from one country to the other, ideas and systems of thought vary, adapt to the local conditions, hybridize. But this is also true when a concept travels from one discipline to another: Lacanian ideas are quite different when used in literary analysis from what they are in psychoanalysis and Lacan's mathematical notions (the so-called "mathemes") are a joke, not really enjoyed by mathematicians or, as he himself said in the US in 1975 (at M. I. T.), rather a form of poetry.

Another issue needs to be tackled at this point. The necessity for American Americanists to learn foreign languages and read the work of their foreign colleagues is not recognized by everybody in the field. It is much easier to realize that you have to be able to read German and/or old Greek to be a philosopher or a historian of philosophy than to learn Spanish or German if your field is American Studies since most materials are in English and produced close to home. Historians, literary critics and sociologists in the US have, to parody an expression used in a different context, taken a "linguistic turn" and either learned foreign languages or read the work of foreign specialists in translation. Foreign Americanists can provide their American colleagues with "objects to think with," as Sherry Turkle puts it (see *Life on the Screen*), even when these objects serve to deconstruct the theories put forward by Europeans. A case in point: Jean Baudrillard, in his book entitled *Amérique*, adopts a controversial viewpoint about America as wilderness, and also recycles many stereotypes about America. Vann Woodward, and Rob Kroes (*If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture*) have pointed out the inadequacies, projections and also the flimsiness of Baudrillard's work. Yet Baudrillard has had an impact on American efforts at self-definition, and has renewed the American tradition of soul-searching and identity quest (from Crèvecoeur to Michael Walzer and his *What it means to be an American*).

Globalization and the academy

Goethe believed that a person who does not know any foreign languages does not know his or her own language. The same is true of cultures as the assertion by Dumont indicated above. The same can be argued about one's intellectual field or discipline. AsGeorge Steiner asserts, "to read is to compare" (384), and globalization has already eroded the national characteristics of thought systems. There may still be various schools in various disciplines, such as the London or Paris psychoanalytical groups, continental and analytic philosophy, the transformative grammar of Chomsky, the *Annales* school of history, "theory" in literary criticism, yet these schools are not isolated islands: theory is Franco-American, Chomsky has followers and detractors everywhere, American historians have become somewhat Europeanized, the so-called linguistic turn has roots in Europe in disciplines other than history (literary criticism and linguistics). American Studies cannot buck the trend and bypass the mixing and cross-fertilization of other intellectual fields. Moreover, a non-imperialist link with Latin American Studies is vital to make American Studies live up to its name.

The world in general knows more about America than America knows about the world. A Canadian researcher, René-Jean Ravault("L'impérialisme boomerang"; "Des effets pervers de l'expansion mondiale des médias américains") even argues that this has led to what he calls "the boomerang effect of imperialism," meaning that America's official efforts to export its mass culture instead of creating positive images of America often achieve the opposite, and also make America transparent to other countries such as Japan and Germany, which can then better tailor export strategies for their products. In the field of American Studies, the situation is, of course, quite different: Americans are in a privileged position to obtain access to the relevant materials, and in quantitative terms enjoy an advantage over their foreign colleagues. Yet from a methodological point of view, the constant comparative efforts the latter have to make is often also an intellectual advantage: comparison offers ready-made "objects to think with" that can be valuable in the study of America.

Foreign Americanists quite obviously need the work of American Americanists who offer concepts and invaluable information from the field. This need may even go too far: too often the work of some foreign Americanists is a kind of translation of the work carried out in America, with local prejudices become international ones; and a form of imported "cultural war" is waged in strange contexts. Ethnic studies is a good example: it is always a bit hazardous to import the tools and linguistic categories devised to describe the situation of another country. German or British realities differ from American ones and cannot be apprehended only through an American lens. No serious study of the US can be undertaken without the resources offered by America in terms of libraries, data bases and access to the work of American specialists. But the study of America cannot be a one-way street either: the stimulation that the work of Ezra Suleiman gave to the study of French

institutions can be replicated in the other direction. The work of the late Marie-France Toinet, an Americanist who was a specialist of government and political institutions, is a good illustration of these transnational interactions.

Unlike what happens in the mass culture industry, there is no American hegemony in the world of ideas and academic work and this is all to the good, including for America itself. Foreign Americanists are America's Other, thanks to them American Americanists may be decentered and questioned from unsuspected angles. Student bodies and staff in American universities are probably the most multicultural in the world though science departments seem to be more international than humanities ones. This academic openness of America's helps redefine the notions of insiders and outsiders: many national outsiders are academic insiders on American campuses and work according to the current American patterns; they also help advertise and broadcast American methodologies and approaches in their countries of origin. Loïc Wacquant may be a French person but he is first and foremost a sociologist and professionally very close to W. J. Wilson, a leading American practitioner of the same discipline (both at the University of Chicago). A few American Americanists working in Europe, such as John Blair (Université de Genève) in Switzerland or John Atherton (Université de Paris VII) in France, have the same bridging function.

This intermingling and cross-fertilization should however not be cause for a renewal of American cultural arrogance. In *Not Like Us*, a book published in 1997, Richard Pells argues that since American culture has been Europeanized one cannot talk about cultural imperialism. Yet I suggest that one cannot treat the importation of theories in the field of literary criticism or sociology in the same way as Hollywood exports. There might not be an American hegemony in the exchange of ideas but it is, of course, different in the entertainment trade. Pells's cultural arrogance shows in the sources he uses: all the references in his book are in English. So we have a transcultural expert who is, as far as one can tell, ignorant of foreign languages and of foreign work that has not been translated into English. This arrogant attitude actually also shows when he discusses the US: "Given the dangers of being downtown at night, Americans tended to retreat to the shelter of their relatively spacious homes, where they could socialize in safety with friends," he writes (293). So Americans do not live in dangerous downtowns, and have spacious and safe homes. Inner-city dwellers will be glad to hear this definition which, once again, excludes them from what it means to be an American. Pells is not an American Studies specialist so it does not reflect on the field, but in a way, it is even worse, for transcultural specialists could be expected to be more sensitive to cultural difference. In *Not Like Us*, Pells proves to be as insensitive to class differences as he is to national ones.

In Whitman's time the world was in America. This is still true, but today America, as the only truly global superpower, is also in the world. America's presence is both welcomed and resented, for good (cultural enrichment) and bad (chauvinism)

reasons, depending on the case. To paraphrase the title of another book by Gitlin, "the whole world is watching America" (*The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*), and America can only be interested in what the world is seeing. From de Tocqueville to Gunnar Myrdal, America has been quite good at benefiting from the intellectual lights of outsiders. Today what is basically one American tradition among many, that is cultural openness, must be reinforced when globalization of one kind or another cannot be avoided. Foreign Americanists by being American Americanists' Other can open up new vistas for insiders, stop hegemonic tendencies, which are all too visible in the political field, and create the conditions for American Studies to be an international, probably global, non-zero sum game. American Studies is thus not a one-way street (or should not be), nor even a two-way one, for contacts and exchanges are multilateral. The field can operate like the Internet with no clearly recognizable center—even if many nodal points are by necessity located in the US. Multilaterality bypasses the dichotomy between center and periphery. In some areas, Americans are being Europeanized or Latinized at a time when many outside North America are afraid of being Americanized. Identities are in flux both within and without national borders. Foreign Americanists may help American colleagues discover some international dimensions in their work. That foreign researchers benefit from their American contacts goes without saying; that the reverse is also true still needs to be said. Real multilaterality thus remains an objective to be attained.

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