

**AMERICAN STUDIES IN
PROSPECTION: NEW VISTAS,
ENDURING LEGACIES**

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ABSTRACT

American Studies stands out today as a major scholarly province, attracting –at the outset of the new millennium- multiform intellectual, academic, and even strategic interests both within the United States and without. The present paper attempts to explore this rather magnetic arena within the overall context of the on-going debate between, on the one hand, those who see the world's return to multipolarity as imminent, entailing therefore the corrosion of America's global supremacy; and, on the other, those who see its current difficulties as not more than "pathologies" of an unprecedentedly impressive trajectory.

No doubt, American Studies is enjoying a surge of interest in academic institutions throughout the world. Such surge is primarily motivated by the ideological appeal which lies behind it in times of conflicting premises on the end-of-century geo-strategic map of the world. This is by and large equated with the rather heated polemic between the "declinists" and the "renewalists" about the real position of the United States in today's world. Understanding the essence of such a polemic, will certainly help elucidate the underpinnings that lie behind the rather impressive magnitude American Studies is now provoking both within the United States and without, as well as its future prospects in the ever-growing multi-disciplinarity of the academic arena. This paper attempts to weigh up the different contentions of these trends and to position American Studies in such imbroglio of ideas.

Almost a decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, American strategists and theorists are still trying to define the new principles round which their country's strategy should be shaped. Premises such as "end of history," "clash of civilizations," "coming anarchy," and "borderless world" are now widely debated in intellectual circles.¹

At the center of such debate is the question of whether the United States has entered an epoch of irretrievable decline or whether it has just witnessed a "change in the basis of American power, as when one person shifts weight from one foot to the other."²

The proponents of "declinism" argue that the United States is living an erosion of its economic capacity which is aggravated by an acute budget deficit.³ This is in addition to the economic challenges it is facing from other industrialized powers in an age of global economic rivalry and regional alliances, especially from a potentially unified Europe heralded by the rise of the "Euro Club" in the wake of the recent Brussels summit.⁴ Europe is in fact tipped to command "economies of scale hitherto more characteristic of the United States."⁵ Consumerism is believed to be at the root of the financial difficulties of the United States which has become a nation living beyond its means -- a life style which the declinists ironically label the "eat, drink, and be merry psychology."⁶

The erosion of America's financial and economic position has entailed an erosion of its strategic lead. This is highlighted by what is considered as its role of "mercenary" in the "Desert Storm" campaign against Iraq.⁷ The United States is in fact being challenged by what some social theorists call "cyclical forces" which it can no longer control through the orthodox mechanisms of national security.⁸ To Paul Kennedy and others, the world is going through a speedy return to multi-polarity, with five centers of economic and military powers: the United States, the E.E.C., Japan, Russia, and China.⁹ The role of "global scout troop leader" seems evermore difficult to play.¹⁰

The declinists' critique is clearly focused on the "physical" aspects of America's retreat; the non-physical or moral elements such as the alarming growth of crime and violence, the rise of the drug culture amongst young people, local corruption, and the problems related to the acute racial divide now plaguing the country, are granted less consideration.¹¹ To the renewal school, however, these should not be viewed as signs of decline but rather as what Max Lerner calls "pathologies of the civilization," and as the tribute a nation like the United States has to pay for its enviable power and bounty.¹²

To the proponents of renewal, no country in the world can today be an alternative hegemonic power to the United States with the ability to mount a multi-dimensional challenge for the leading role in the world.¹³ Compared with that of its competitors, American strength is multi-dimensional; it draws from many sources: the population size, natural resources, economic development, military strength, and diplomatic alliances. This is in addition to what is believed to be its ideological appeal as well as the success of its universities, especially in the highly advanced technological fields.¹⁴ The strong economic base grounded on the manufacturing capacity -- ardently defended by the adepts of Adam Smith's doctrine as a prerequisite for any country aspiring to become a great power -- is refuted by the renewalists as anachronistic. The service industries, which depend on the flow of information that may not at all be related to manufacturing, have today become more important than the manufacturing industries.¹⁵ The "knowledge structure" is in fact

the kernel of America's power --it bestows it with the ability to control access to information.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, more than two decades ago, some theorists such as Daniel Bell and Zbigniew Brzezinski advanced the premise that the fall of industrial productivity was rather a sign of evolution towards the post-industrial or "technetronic" society of which the United States was the precursor.¹⁷

Competition, mobility, and immigration are considered as the major engines behind America's ability for constant renewal. With monopoly traditionally rejected and American bureaucracy and trade unionism being the weakest in the world, investment and individual endeavour for social elevation remain unhampered.¹⁸ Individual mobility, both vertical and horizontal, and also immigration are still dynamic forces in the American population. The impressive number of foreign-born Americans having won the Nobel Prize in recent years, testifies to the immense importance of immigrants to American society.¹⁹ It is believed that the United States has managed to consolidate its non-territorial empire in which nationality is no longer a pre-condition as anyone can, for example, take part in the American "financial empire" as long as he or she is using the American dollar in financial transactions. The United States has indeed secured its domination of world economy through a number of "legions" which are economic rather than military.²⁰ And by the same token, anyone can take part in the "cultural empire" as long as one is fostering America's basic ideals and values. These participants are in effect viewed as "peripheral allies" of the American empire.²¹ --a conference of this kind may be one.

American Studies, which is proliferating in most parts of the world at a rather extraordinary pace, first emerged in the 1930's, primarily to enhance the idea of an independent American culture, and also to discard the belief in the inconceivability of an "American civilization."²² At the root of the discipline there was in fact the notion of "American exceptionalism." The unresolved questioning of "what's American about America?" incited scholars to examine and define the American character, mind, myths, and symbols.²³ As a discipline, American Studies came into being to capture all trends of American history and culture.

American exceptionalism is tightly associated with the uniqueness of the American experiment imparting its energy from some rather distinct trajectories of vision and destiny. The prime features of this experiment include the absence of a feudal system, the metaphorical implications of the "frontier,"²⁴ swift social mobility, the "melting pot" positiveness, and the ideological appeal of a puritan-bred "Americanism."²⁵ Some scholars even assign to American Studies a role that largely transcends the inter-disciplinary fusion of different trends of American culture and history. In point of fact, the discipline is expected to compete with --if not to "substitute"-- the traditional doctrines. Leon Samson, for example, observes that:

Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory,... but a doctrine --what socialism is to a socialist. Like socialism, Americanism is looked upon not patriotically, as a personal attachment, but rather as highly attenuated, conceptualized, platonic, impersonal attraction toward a system of ideas, a solemn assent to a handful of final notions-- democracy, liberty opportunity, to all of which the American adheres rationalistically much as a socialist adheres to his socialism -because it gives him work, because, so he thinks, it guarantees his happiness.²⁶

By the same token, American Studies is used by the renewalists as an implement to refute the declinist thesis, insisting that the current universal echoes of the discipline strengthen America's distinctiveness and cultural independence, and also harnesses America's position in this end-of-century global imbroglio.

Yet, despite the scholarly efforts deployed to make American Studies meet transnational requirements, academics articulate what they see as "poverty of theory" in the discipline.²⁷ Others opine that U.S.-based specialists will have to "relinquish the privileged ownership of their field to collaborate with foreign colleagues as equal partners."²⁸ Dialogue and approximation of ideas and interests should be preserved to improve the discipline. Improvement also requires the availability of specialized literature as well as free access to outlets such as Internet. This would inevitably promote communication, cooperation, and understanding among multi-national specialists.

NOTES

- 1). Robert S. Chase, Emily B. Hill, and Paul Kennedy, *Foreign Affairs*, 75, no.1 (Jan.-Feb. 1996), 33.
- 2). For more details, see Susan Strange, "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 551-573; see also idem, "Still an Extraordinary Power: America's Role in a Global Monetary System," in Raymond E. Lombra and Willard E. White, eds., *Political Economy of International and Domestic Monetary Relations* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982): 73-103.
- 3). The American budget deficit is currently estimated at \$120 billion dollars. On the declinist thesis, see Walter Russell Mead, *Mortal Splendor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony* (New York: Basic Books, 1987; and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York:

Random House, 1987).

- 4). Andrew C. Goldberg, "Selective Engagement: U.S. National Security Policy in the 1990's," *The Washington Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 20.5. Goldberg, 20.
- 6). The U.S. consumes as much as 78% of its G.N.P. as opposed to Japan for example which consumes only 67% of its G.N.P., and saves only 14.8% of its G.D.P. whereas Japan saves as much as 32.5 of its G.D.P. It has, in fact, to borrow to cover for consumption. See Peter G. Peterson, "The Morning After," *The Atlantic* (Oct. 1987), 49.
- 7). It was Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Germany and Japan which actually financed the war for the United States.
- 8). Raymond L. Garthoff, "Why Did the Cold War Arise, and Why Did it End?" *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 292; see also Goldberg, 22.
- 9). Paul Kennedy, "Does America Need Perestroika?" *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Spring 1988), 6.
- 10). Goldberg, 16.
- 11). Tapan Keimar Basu, "Beyond the National Question: Shifting Agendas of African-American Resistance," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Feb. 12? 1994), 379; David Brion Davis, "The American Dilemma," *The New York Review* (July 16, 1992), 13; see also Andrew Hacher, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner, 1992).
- 12). Max Lerner, *America As A Civilization* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., repr. 1987), 1007.
- 13). *The Economist* (Aug. 13-19, 1988), 30.
- 14). Henry Rosovsky, "Highest Education," *The New Republic* (July 13 and 20, 1987), 13-14.
- 15). See Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- 16). 95 % of the information flow through Internet for example comes from the U.S. and in English.
- 17). Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New: Basic Books, 1973; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).
- 18). American trade unionism is for example is weaker than that of Great where the T.U.C. enjoys a considerable political role.
- 19). For example, of the 114 American Nobel-Prize winners between 1945 and 1984, 36 were foreign born.
- 20). These economic legions include the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.), the World Bank, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.), and the World Trade Organization. See Susan Strange, "The Future of the American Empire," *Journal of International Affairs* (Spring 1988), 10.

- 21). Ibid., 11.
- 22). Max Lerner, 954. Lerner had particularly in mind Arnold Toynbee's contention that "America was no civilization in itself but only the tag-end of western civilization, in effect the tail of the European dog!" Ibid.
- 23). See Alan Trachtenberg, "Myth and Symbol," *Massachusetts Review*, 25 (Winter 1984), 670-71.
- 24). See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).
- 25). Warren Susman, *Culture as History: Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 41.
- 26). Leon Samson, "Americanism as Surrogate Socialism," in John Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream?: Essays in the History of American Socialism* (New York: Anchor, 1974), 426.
- 27). Robert Sklar, "The Problem of an American Studies 'Philosophy': A Bibliography of New Directions," *American Quarterly*, 27 (Aug. 1979), 260.
- 28). Doris Friedensohn, "Towards a post-imperial Transnational American Studies: Notes of a Frequent Flyer," *Revista Critica de Ciencias Sociais*, 47 (May 1996), 167.