

**Demystifying American culture :  
a complex exercise of cultural interaction**

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**Abstract**

Teaching American Studies in Algerian Universities consists in both acquiring knowledge about an d demystifying American Culture. Though apparently destructive, because it opposes the stereotypes, myths and clichés conveyed by media dominated by American Culture, the latter exercise turns out to be in the long run a most interesting example of Cultural interaction. It implies, indeed, both identification with the other and thus, self-re definition along lines that I shall discuss at more length- and revelation to the other of his own contradictions either silenced by his own culture purposely or unsuspected because of Cultural centeredness.

At the present era where diversity is swiftly replacing uniformity and exclusiveness, demystification thus, becomes a precious instrument for knowledge about oneself and the Other. It also proves that more than " mutual understanding " it means Cultural complementary thereby demonstrating the Cultural contribution made by poor and underdeveloped Societies to richer ones.

Until very recently the bipolar division of the World and the ensuing search for cultural hegemony made the demystifying of American Culture look not so much a scholarly disinterested enterprise as a partisan attack undoubtedly backed by the opponent. Such interpretation deterred more than one student of America and American Culture from carrying out what was still thought scientifically necessary by the increasing influence of American Culture. American scholars themselves hardly distanced from such Americanocentrism. And this conformism was all the stranger as in the past Americans such as Thoreau, Charles Beard and Thorstein Veblen, to name only some of them, had looked critically at America which they presented as an entity of conflict and struggle much like any other Nation.

Nowadays, such dissenting attitude seems to have come to life again, most probably because the battle over the enemy has been won. Scholars and cultural Historians like Alan Trachtenberg, Myra Jehlen, Sacvan Bercovitch and many others, do study America, its History and Culture with concepts applied to other Nations. Ideological dissension, regional conflicts, class struggle and ethnic divisions are seen to have been part of America as soon as the first settlers reached its coasts.<sup>1</sup> And it is my contention in this paper that this demystifying of America can gain much from foreign contribution and most particularly from those parts of the third world with no history of rivalry and antagonism with the U.S. This paper however, does not stop at such point. It also discusses how such exercise leads to extensive intercultural relationships and paves the way for a cultural complementary that has so much importance in any global approach of the World.

Demystifying American Culture, by which I mean here history and literature, requires first and foremost a good synchronic and diachronic knowledge of America. And this means knowing about the founding principles of America of which the most outstanding is the *ex pluribus unum* that is diversity and cohesion, and about the evolution – or regression – of such principles starting from the birth of the country or its first settlements. Diversity of region, class, ethnic groups and races, religions and political beliefs is thus most important to study together with the means and instruments used to impose union. While originally believed to be a gift of God to its chosen people, this harmony has been recently shown to be the incessant work of American Culture, which in the form of books, newspapers, pamphlets – and nowadays the media –

wrought , developed and disseminated the myths that would become common belief to diverse peoples and creeds and move them to action<sup>2</sup> This aspect of American Culture constitutes the most valuable American contributions to the knowledge of man and societies as it shows how coherence can be maintained when no past or common race or civilisation – in the sense of a historical way of life – link a community. Diachrony teaches about the difficulties , oppositions , and conflicts that this conception of Society and Nation faced. Diachrony or History undoes the American most perfect utopia . First and for most the union meant exclusion of the different and the weak , that is of the non-Easterner , the farmer , the non-English speaker , who tried to exploit the vicissitudes of history to break its rigid frame . Thus during the troubled aftermath of the Independence , the civil war , the 1890's and the thirties , the most perfect America was on the verge of dissolving and the myths of convergence contested . Such periods of disorder are of course heresy to the Union who prefers to insist on the way they were overcome and harmony restored .

Thus, the reform of the Progressive Era are more stressed than the ethnic , cultural and political turmoil that preceded them. The new deal of Roosevelt is widely acclaimed while the threats of cultural , regional and political dimension that followed the Great Depression are silenced . The present efforts at ethnic and social integration are so vehemently stressed that the occasional outbursts of violence and bombs look inexplicable. These, however, viewed from a diachronic perspective appear as the continuation of previous conflicts and present the instruments of cohesion as less powerful than they used to be.

This deconstruction of the American Myth is not meant to vilify America as the most corrupt nation or state in the world nor as the most evil one . It is rather aimed at satisfying an all too legitimate scholarly curiosity about what one too often feels to be a most misrepresented America both inside and outside this country . Such exercise thus addresses also those negative stereotypes disseminated by cultural areas , such as the European one , competing for hegemony . The allegedly naive and gauche American culture without the veneer provided by centuries of history to Europe thus reveals its complexity when studied with the proper instruments and concepts, such as those used by Bercovitch in *The American mid* which presents it as a culturally sophisticated edifice .

A look at Weber's blind support of American democracy so different from the German authoritarianism which he opposed but also so far from the reality of the Corrupt Tamany all reveals that such European distortions are used for internal purposes.<sup>3</sup> And the much-praised objectivity of European culture, outwardly laudative of science and culture seems to have a strangely subjective side. A most valuable contribution to the demystifying of American culture to bringing to light those conflicts and realities which have been either purposely silenced by the strong or deeply repressed can be made by the third world observer with a common experience of the difficulties of independence and consensus but also living in a real in the making and still with the contradictions and conflicts carefully handled and tackled in America. In this respect, Barbara Clarke Mossberg's claim that « students from outside the United States have a singular advantage over their American counterparts that can be used productively in studying the United States : that is, a built-in comparative perspective when they study culture » though taken out of context, applies strikingly to our point.

4 Literature which allows the weak and the marginal to express themselves in an indirect way and which thus reveals the repressed and silenced real of a society is of precious help. Thus, aware of the difficulties of plurality and consensus, the third world observer will view in such novels about industrialisation after the Civil War as Dreiser's Trilogy of desire signs indicating that Post-War America, with a very weak Democratic party looked strangely like a totalitarian democracy ruled by a single party, the Republican party. These novels further show that Eastern capitalists did everything to exclude ethnic industrialists and to prevent the emergence to power of an ethnic class of experts more open to industrialism and better prepared to it.

During such study of American culture and in highlighting the dark spots of the latter by the means of his own culture, the third world observer is thus opening American culture to other areas than the European one. He thus proves that third world cultures cannot be considered as sole repositories – and passive ones – of Western culture to which they must adapt. They also contain and reverberate aspects of this culture which have been toned down for various reasons, ranging from ideological to environmental ones. Common grounds thus exist between cultures as seemingly different as the third world and the American ones. In such commonness lie the seeds of a universal culture accepting what should appear as its diverse facets and developments, a fact, which should

please the supporter of the *ex pluribus unum*. Such view of culture does away with the traditional division into periphery and centre made by classical sociologists. Moreover, it contests the much talked about « mutual understanding » which would suppose that two different cultures are brought face to face and must tolerate each other's difference. To understand, indeed, is to face what cannot be accepted at first and implies a passive surrendering to the strangeness and uncanniness of the other.

But, it is worth noting as well, that such exercise of demystification of American Culture not only makes the centre move to the periphery but also the periphery to the centre. Indeed, the Third World observer, like Caroline Porter's observer, becomes the " participant observer whose contemplative distance ...is undermined from within, and the observer of an immediately given world is exposed as a participant in the mediated activity of which that world is constituted."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, viewing America in terms of his own culture and history makes him consider it as another version of his World, as another facet illuminating in turn his own difficulties and even sometimes helping to solve them. The American « Other » thus, becomes the Double, a specular image precipitating, in the best case, that self-knowledge needed for growth and evolution. Such process is to be distinguished from the blind application of the American model carried out by some Third World elites professing their admiration for the American dream and success. It is rather to be understood in terms of a pedagogy highlighting areas of darkness and putting into form or words what was inchoate because without « reflection ». This further illustrates the point that we have been defending throughout this paper, namely that cross-cultural contacts should not be viewed in terms of contacts between inferiors and superiors but in terms of mutual benefit and growing self-knowledge provided by the « Other » who is not so different after all.

## NOTES

1 See Ideology and Classical American Literature , ed. Myra Jehlen (NY : Cup , 1986 ) .

2 Sacvan Bercovitch , The American Jeremiad ( Madison : The Univ. of Wisconsin Press , 1978 , The Culture of Consumption , eds. T.J. LEARS and R.W. Fox ( N.Y. : Pantheon , 1985 ) .

3 Le Savant et le Politique ( Alger : ENAG , 1991 ) , p. 115 .

4 « Introduction » Handbook for the Study of the United States , eds. William rate and Perry Frank ( Washington : U.S.A. , 1989 ) , XVI .

5 « Reification and American Literature » Ideology and Classical American Literature , op. cit. , p. 199 .