

The Omnipresence of America and the Absence of American Studies⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: This article addresses the near absence of American Studies, as an Academic discipline, and in cultural and intellectual debates on America in the Arab world. This absence prevails despite — and to a large extent due to — the overwhelming political, economic, media and cultural presence of the United States in the Arab region and the third world. It persists despite the preoccupation with the US presence and the divisive, if not contradictory love/hate feelings about it. The polarization between clichéd positions does not leave a space for an analysis of American foreign policy based on an informed critique of US domestic policies.

Critical Cultural Studies and Transnationalism approach made a difference in American Studies in the United States, but it is not of use in the American Studies outside America, where American Studies cannot be a sort of critical cultural studies. The only way to study America in the third world is to use social sciences and humanities tools to generate Area Studies of the United States. In any case, the author believes that before they were globalized, modern social sciences in general emerged as "Area Studies" of European societies — and non-European societies — by Europeans.

United States

American Studies

Arab World

Area Studies

Hegemony

Cultural Studies

Domination

This article addresses the relative absence of American Studies, as a discipline, and in cultural and intellectual debates on America in the Arab world. This absence prevails despite — and to a large extent due to — the overwhelming political, economic, media and cultural presence of the United States in the Arab region. The polarization between clichéd positions does not leave a space for an analysis of American foreign policy based on an informed critique of domestic policies in the United States. This is not unique to the Arab world but, in my opinion, also applies to other regions in the so-called Third World. The field itself has been subject to critical cultural, intellectual and literary inquiry through some in Middle Eastern or Arab countries, such as the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut. Besides, individual

Arab scholars engaged in a critique of US foreign policy as part of their investigation of the image of America in the Arab world, yet, a systemic cultural and intellectual investigation of American Studies as an independent discipline, where the local narrative of America is neither occluded nor marginalized, seems to be absent in the Arab world, especially in academic and intellectual discourse, which is a key source in the broader molding of a political culture in the Arab world.

Here it seems necessary to briefly outline the beginnings of American Studies itself as a discipline. Among academics, the birth of "American Studies" as an institutionalized academic discipline can be traced back to the establishment of "American Civilization"

¹ This article is an extended version of the author's keynote speech presented at the opening ceremonies of the international conference titled "From Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park: The Arab Spring and the De-Centering of American Studies," Co-organized by the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and George Washington University, held from 8-11 January 2018.

programs at Harvard and Yale during the 1930s.⁽²⁾ More broadly, and outside of the academy, the birth of the discipline can be accredited to the 1927 book *Main Currents in American Thought* by Vernon Louis Parrington (1871-1929). Yet this milestone can be pushed back further still, at least to Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) and even to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835-1840).

Nonetheless, it was not until the 1940s, and the aftermath of World War II, that the journal *American Quarterly* was established. This was followed by an Association of American Studies in 1951.⁽³⁾ American Studies developed, in practice, in the atmosphere of the Cold War. It had already been transported to Western Europe and Scandinavia. At the time, Europeans were interested in their continent's commonalities with the US, but also in what distinguished the United States from the rest of "the West," including what Europeans may have considered the flaws of American society. In this Cold War climate, the Soviet Union had a vested interest in studying its major adversary and the leader of the capitalist world. According to Joshua Dubrow, 700 books were published on the US in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1971, half of which dealt with foreign policy and diplomacy while 50 were devoted to the history and economy of the United States.⁽⁴⁾

Throughout this period, the academic disciplines of history and literature dominated American Studies both in Europe and North America, while sociology was relegated to a peripheral role. Dubrow, relying on data from cross-citations between the journals devoted to American Studies and sociology, shows how the two disciplines, rather than interact, somewhat ignored each other.⁽⁵⁾ As an interdisciplinary academic field, American Studies sought to understand the "American-ness," or the defining features, of the United States. Its emergence coincided with the rise

of the United States as a globally active superpower in the post-Second World War order. It represented not only economic, geo-strategic, and ideological interests, and a military counterweight to the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, but also an American way of life.

From the outset, American Studies focused on culture and cultural issues — or more specifically on the answer to one question: What is American? Or rather, *who* is an American? Perhaps this was, as noted by J. Hillis Miller in 1998, part of an attempt to create a single American national culture that did not really exist.⁽⁶⁾ However, an image of such a culture was constructed and that, or at least the different images of that image became part of the "American way of life."

Expectedly, "culture" in the sense of literature, folklore and symbols constituted a major preoccupation of American Studies that was occupied with "American-ness." The birth of American Studies thus provided an academic contribution to the crystallization of an American identity around an ethnic and cultural core. Its narrative was manifested in Puritanism via settlements, the tension between town community vs. individual urban culture, the taming of wilderness, moral life in the family and distorted concepts of humanity and double standards concerning the indigenous people and slavery, free country, individualism, free enterprise, the tension between morality and success and achievement as values, and Protestantism, conformism and non-conformism, concepts that were vividly expressed in American literature.

In the Arab region, meanwhile, a number of authors have sought to recount – be it impressionistically or analytically – their personal experiences of US society. Countless studies have been published on US politics, particularly in the context of its alliance with

2 Philip Gleason, "World War II and the Development of American Studies," *American Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1984), pp. 343–358, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3EVdW78>

3 Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow, "Sociology and American Studies: A Case Study in the Limits of Interdisciplinarity," *The American Sociologist*, vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2011), pp. 304-305, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/2Wh6Msk>

4 Ibid., p. 305.

5 Ibid., pp. 309-310.

6 J. Hillis Miller, "Literary and Cultural Studies in the Transnational University," in: John Carlos Rowe (ed.), *"C ulture" and the Problem of the Disciplines* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 59.

Israel or the conflict between Arab regimes allied with different camps during the Cold War.

Nationalist movements in the Arab world, Iran and Turkey were not anti-American, in fact they included elements that were sympathetic to what was then considered to be American principles and to America as a "free country." The anti-American sentiment spread with the growing acceptance that, in the wake of the Second World War, US imperialism was emerging (or extended outside the context of the Americas) and that it would replace British and French colonialism in Asia and Africa (the US-backed military coups against Mosaddegh in Iran and Sukarno in Indonesia and the pro-Israeli and pro-Saudi Policies against Nasserist Egypt helped to sharpen this sense). Nationalist sentiments mixed with Soviet cold war rhetoric to produce literature which was decidedly anti-American, and became dominant in those countries not aligned with Washington. In contrast, works which could be described as "sympathetic" to America were to be found in the margins of those countries which were nominal allies of the US. This was a consequence of the fact that those governments which allied themselves to Washington did so because they perceived it as the heir to Britain and France; they had no real admiration for the "American way of life" or commitment to "American values."

The anti-American discourse was subsequently Islamized with the rise of political Islamist movements in the 1970s, culminating with the literal "demonization" of the US by the political rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Later, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, US involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and eventually, its stance on the Arab Spring, were milestones in the development of American Studies (in reality, studies of American policy) in the Arab region, where questions of US foreign policy and the history of America's role in the

Middle East and North Africa came to dominate the field. In the 2016 book *American Studies Encounters the Middle East*,⁽⁷⁾ the authors focus on the political and cultural role of the United States in this region through changing historical settings.

Since the 1990s, opponents of American policies in the third world have often resorted to left and liberal Western writers who were critical of American foreign policies to help elucidate America for them.⁽⁸⁾ Their critique was instrumental in other regions, but it was usually disconnected from research of American state and society. Furthermore, the adoption of these American writers' critique of American foreign policy did not necessarily lead the recipients to embrace the original authors' wider values: leftist, liberal or otherwise. Democrats benefited from this critique, but in many cases, however, Shi'i and Sunni Islamists, leftists, or nationalists were focused on the mobilization of the Arab public. In this context, these critiques of American foreign policy were more credible by virtue of being written by Americans. The Arab left has mostly focused on US foreign policy, and, when it came to understanding the American society and politics, repeated the usual catchphrases concerning the crisis and decadence of late capitalism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist block, this shallow anti-Americanism could easily turn into uncritical admiration of everything American, including foreign policy.

To date, critics have largely drawn on the work of such American writers. Yet examples of Arab academics, journalists or politicians who have turned to American Studies, as a discipline, in their analysis of landmark events surrounding American policy in the Middle East have been rare. Analyses of wars on Afghanistan and Iraq; the issue of Palestine, which remains the single most influential source driving negative attitudes towards the United States in the

7 Alex Lubin & Marwan M. Kraidy (eds.), *American Studies Encounters the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

8 My friend Prof. Hamid Dabashi reminded me of the role of the leading African-American intellectuals like W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington and many other early critics of the United States policies. We should also remember that the Cuban revolutionary José Martí's *Our America* (1892) was written against the monopoly of the term "American" for white people in North America. However this literature is not well known to Arab and Muslim intellectuals and researchers interested in the United States and has subsequently very little influence on them; a deficiency that could be dealt with in any future American Studies in the region.

Arab world;⁽⁹⁾ American policy towards the Arab revolutions to name a few have not drawn upon American Studies. There were only limited, individual cases which proved to be exceptions to this rule;⁽¹⁰⁾ they tended to focus on a reading of theological American nationalism ("Manifest Destiny") and how this informed a relationship with Israel that went beyond political and economic pragmatism.⁽¹¹⁾

Syrian scholar Munir al-Akash is the author of two books on the genocide of the Native indigenous people in North America, and the legal foundation which underpinned it. He writes about the similarities between early settler colonial theology and practice in America with Palestine and Zionism in *The Right to Sacrifice the Other: America and Genocides* (2002): "America is nothing less than the applied English understanding of the historical idea of Israel, and every detail of the history of English colonization of North America attempted to find its roots in the literature of that Israel. It reincarnates its facts, heroes, and religious, social, and political dimensions; it adopts its credo of 'divine selection,' self-worship, and the right to possess the land and lives of others. They thought they were, even called themselves, 'Israelites,' 'Hebrews,' and 'Jews.' They called the new world 'the land of Canaan' and 'the new Israel,'

and borrowed all the moral justifications for the extermination of the Native Americans (Canaanites) and the invasion of their country from the historical imaginations of the Hebrews."⁽¹²⁾

In Chapter 4, titled "Canaan as a Weapon," from his other book, *America and Cultural Genocides: The Curse of the English Canaan* (2009), al-Akash writes: "Canaanization of the victims has long been a weapon of genocide and a loom for God's English people to weave all the justifications for this genocide. Canaanization says: Canaanites exist only to be annihilated 'I am a being for death' the resurrection of all those born in the land of Canaan. Existence mistook its time and place in the land of Canaan, all those in it were destined for a false life."⁽¹³⁾

Clearly, al-Akash's prime motivation here was to try to understand the roots of Americans' identification with the Zionist settlement project in Palestine. In my opinion, American Studies can illuminate this and other aspects that scholars in Arab countries have thus far failed to draw attention to in their analysis of American foreign policy and its roots in the United States itself.

In my own work, I have dealt with various models of secularism and secularization in differing historical contexts. Among other aims, I have tried to show that

9 According to the results of the Arab Opinion Index—an annual field survey conducted in the Arab countries by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies—most Arab citizens negatively evaluated American policies in the region. In the 2016 poll, 77% of the Arab public thought that US policy in the region was negative, compared with only 15% who rated it positively. In comparison with previous Arab Opinion Index findings, the Arab public's assessment of US policy in the region has become more negative. In 2014, about half of Arab public opinion (49%) negatively assessed US foreign policy. This figure rose to 65% in 2015 and reached 77% in 2016. Analyzing the reasons for the negative view of the Arab public on American policy in the region, showed that it is not based on animosity towards the American people, but is based mainly on American foreign policies in the region. 73% of Arabs expressed a positive attitude towards the American people. In other words, the view of the United States in isolation from politics is positive overall, while the assessment of respondents to US policies on a specific set of current issues in the Arab region has been negative. American policy towards Palestine received the most negative rating among the Arab public, with 80% agreeing that American policy regarding the Palestinian issue was bad. This was followed by American policy in Iraq with a negative assessment by 78% of the Arab public surveyed. The Arab assessment of US policy in Syria was negative among the majority of respondents with 77% saying so. With almost identical proportions, the majority of the Arab public had a negative opinion of US policies in Libya and Yemen, with 72% and 71%, respectively. On the other hand, positive assessment of US policy toward these current issues rates only 12%, while a very positive assessment ranges from only 2% to 3%. See: "al-Mu'ashir al-'Arabī 2016," *Index*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, pp. 298-299, 304-306, accessed on December 6, 2017, at: <https://bit.ly/3zMYshN>; "Arab Public Opinion and US Presidential Elections 2016," *Arab Center Washington DC*, November 1, 2016, pp. 2-3, accessed on December 6, 2017, at: <https://bit.ly/3AJ4QrD>

10 For example, see: Nidal Fawwaz Al-Abboud, *al-Intikhabāt ar-Ri'āsiyya al-'Amrīkiyya: al-'Ab'ād at-Tārīkiyya wa as-Siyāsiyya wa ad-Dustūriyya* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2017); Hussein Kanaan, *Min Jūrj Wāshīnṭun 'Ilā 'Ubāmā: al-Wilāyāt al-Mutahida al-'Amrīkiyya wa al-Nizām ad-Dawlī* (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 2013); Mohammed al-Sammak, *ad-Dīn fī al-Qarār al-'Amrīkī* (Beirut: Dar An-Nafāes, 2012); Walid Abdel Nasser, *Min Bush 'Ilā 'Ubāmā: al-Mujtama' wa as-Siyāsa fī al-Wilāyāt al-Mutahida* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Translation and Distribution, 2010); Fouad Zakaria, *al-'Arab wa al-Namūdḥaj al-'Amrīkī* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Muasser, 1980); Abdel-Wahab al-Messiri, *al-Firdaws al-'Ardī: Dīrāsāt wa Intibā'āt 'an al-Ḥadāra al-'Amrīkiyya al-Ḥadītha* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1979). See also: Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* (Toronto: Penguin Press HC, 2008); Michael W. Suleiman, *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

11 See: Azmi Bishara, "'Awda 'Ilā al-Ḥarb al-Bārīda, 'am Wāqī' Dawlī Jadīd Mukhtalīf?," *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*, vol. 356 (October 2008); Azmi Bishara, "'Amn 'Isrā'īl 'Istrāṭījiyya 'Amrīkiyya," [Arabic] *Wijhat Nadhar*, no. 53 (June 2003).

12 Munir al-Akash, *Ḥaq at-Taḍḥīyya bil-'Ākhar: 'Amrīka wa al-'Ibādāt aj-Jamā'iyya* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2002), pp. 123-124.

13 Munir al-Akash, *'Amrīka wa al-'Ibādāt ath-Thaqāfiyya: La 'nat Kan 'ān al-'Inklīziyya* (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2009), p. 68.

the French model of secularism, highly influential in the Arab sphere, was not the only available example of a secular state and that the United Kingdom and the United States provide an alternate model. To that end, I did not rely on writings within the field of American Studies, but to studies which address history and sociology, as well as legal and constitutional studies, beginning with Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Harold J. Berman, John Rawls, Julius Gould, Robert N. Bellah, Peter L. Berger, David L. Edwards, Phillip E. Hammond, Donald G. Jones, Catherine L. Albanese, Jon Butler, Russell E. Richey, and Christian Smith. This was the same framework which I deployed in an earlier book on the concept of civil society in the history of ideas.⁽¹⁴⁾

The works of the authors listed above, and others I consulted, cover a range of academic disciplines, including history, sociology and constitutional law. Some of them, such as de Tocqueville's nineteenth century study of American society, may be described as anthropological studies of America. From my perspective however, all of these disciplines can be seen to contribute to an interdisciplinary "Area Studies" of the United States of America. Whilst reviewing some of the academic work on state and society (or societies) in the United States, I analyzed these studies from within the rubric defined as the "social sciences" writ large not from the perspective of "who is American?" or "what is American-ness?"

When trying to understand the ever-important question of American policy and American influence on the world stage within the context of globalization—a phenomenon often confused with Americanization—researchers often turn to works which are rooted in political science, international relations and economics. They search for their answers in works framed in terms of ideology, or which refer to media studies and mass communication to help unravel the spread of US popular culture, a domain in which it competes with European countries. This could be a way to sift through the tidal wave of symbols, images and messages coming to us from America, which, to frame it in Marxist terminology, remains the country with the most advanced "means of production" and distribution not only of "High Tech" but also of

symbols and images (in terms of the media industry, production today is also practically distribution). To understand this overwhelming phenomenon critically, we should seek to establish the power relationships, political and economic hegemony and ideologies which lies behind it.

Yet generally, academics in the third world remain more interested in studying the United States from the prism of political science and international relations. The Arab region has been greatly engaged with the study of American foreign policy. Writers and activists relied in some cases on US-based critics who differed with the country's Palestine policies, who opposed the war in Vietnam, US policy toward Nasser's Egypt, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the post-9/11 War on Terror. During the Iraq War, we sought to understand who the neoconservatives truly were, and concluded that they were the "far right" and that some of them were "ex leftists," and that all of them are staunch pro-Israelis. Donald Trump's support of despotic regimes were a reminder that the neocons had in fact believed in democracy, and saw contradiction with Islam. Of course, it was their policy of belligerent export of democracy by occupation, so-called nation building, as well as their fanatic pro-Israel approach to the Palestinian question, which were the real disasters.

In contrast, Arab research was not occupied with the "American-ness" which distinguishes the United States, the preserve of American Studies, but rather with American politics and the roots of those politics. In their attempts to deconstruct American policies and go beyond the repetition of anti-American slogans, Arab writers critical of US policies largely attempt to demonstrate two main assumptions. The first is that America does not aim to spread freedom or fight terrorism, contrary to its claims — that these ideological claims are simply a superficial veneer to economic and geo-strategic policies and interests. Secondly, that America is irrational, adventurous, and reckless when compared with Europe. If we consider this latter proposition well, we find that it contradicts the first.

The association between an ostensible export of freedom or democracy with imperialist policies, based

14 Azmi Bishara, *ad-Dīn wa al-'Ilmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, 3 vols. (Beirut/Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013-2015).

on examples where it was used to justify catastrophic wars of aggression, when combined with equating US policies with Imperialism, has led to the point where any struggle against dictatorship can be depicted as an imperialist plot. Patriotic democrats fighting against local dictatorships based on their own agenda find themselves sometimes in conflict with elements in the European and American anti-imperialist left willing to stand with any anti-American government, regardless of how tyrannical it might be and with total disregard of the fact that there could be other imperialist domination policies like the Russian, that support the tyrannical regimes. They might decide any national struggle for democracy to be an American conspiracy simply because America sympathizes with it. This is often true even if the sympathy is only paying lip service, and even if the existing tyranny uses an anti-imperialist discourse but in reality seeks to be accepted by the US unconditionally.

In understanding the United States, Arab scholars have tended to underestimate and neglect factors which are purely ideological or cultural, such as Americans' self-perceptions and the sensibilities of large, influential groups within the US that regard their country as the champion of a universalist message. Often left by the wayside, too, is the convergence of radical sections of the US and European left with isolationist American conservatives in their opposition to any global policy, even to superpower responsibilities in general, concerning war crimes and crimes against humanity for example. So too are other cultural elements which inform American politics left out of consideration by Arab and third world scholars in general.

Back to Area Studies?

The political-cultural split that accompanied Trump's ascension to power has underscored the importance of American political culture and the internal conflict of cultures going on inside the United States, which reaffirms the need to study it more than any so-called "clash of civilizations."⁽¹⁵⁾

Any consideration of the differences, not just between left and right, Democrats and Republicans,

or liberals and conservatives, but even within the right itself, between the elitism of the neoconservatives and the nationalist right populism of Trump, would underscore the importance of the intellectual and cultural differences *inherent* in various groupings in the US. Differences between the East and West Coasts on the one hand and the Midwest on the other; between rural and urban America; and within each of these camps themselves. The impact of these divisions on foreign policy needs to be understood.

I believe that American studies would do well to return from its current transnational critical tendency, without giving away what it already accomplished on the epistemological level, and pivot back to the United States and its internal frontiers, and apply its critical approach to analyzing and understanding the American socioeconomic and cultural contexts that produced the political-cultural phenomena such as nationalist right populism.

The overwhelming presence of the United States and disagreements in attitudes towards it, whether love or hate — even simultaneous love *and* hate — may incentivize research into the special characteristics of America, as if the reasons for these attitudes were contained in America's essential features. Yet focusing on American specificities may lead us astray, and could produce contradictory results depending on which path we choose to follow. We could start by being preoccupied with the principle of freedom, the scale of the US economy and military power, or the arrogance of power and adventurism beginning with European settlement and the extermination of the indigenous population. We could come across America's current vision of itself as an empire based on force, or the self-understanding of a settler society that it is a bastion of freedom and democracy, or even "doing it my way," whether that means absolute individualism or the use of extra-judicial violence at home and abroad.

The search for an American specificity may lead scholars to conclude that it can be found in the extraordinary power of symbols and images and the ease with which they can be spread through

15 I another article I considered the contest in the last presidential elections in the US a cultural war within an internalization of the clash of civilizations: Azmi Bishara, "The Rise of the Right and the Adoption of the Clash of Civilizations: When Democracy Spawns the Antithesis of Liberalism," *Research Paper*; Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, December 2016, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3ARFNTa>

the global consumer economy. It could be found in the distinctive structure of religion in American society coupled with state secularism in the United States. It might be found in baseball, long a rite of passage in the United States, the passion for which, unlike basketball, has failed to spread around the world (despite the American insistence on calling its national championship the "World Series" as if it were the baseball equivalent of the FIFA World Cup).⁽¹⁶⁾ A researcher might be engaged with one of those topics her whole life. It would certainly prove an enjoyable engagement.

But when a non-American researcher (for our purposes, an Arab) studies the United States, he or she is generally concerned with the source of its global influence, its socioeconomic political model, and why people around the world are divided in their approaches to the US. Most of these researchers are interested in US foreign policy, whether they view it as imperialist or just endless crisis management. They largely draw on studies by American researchers about society, state and economy in the United States, and are oriented towards political science, history, sociology and, more recently, cultural studies. This echoes the area studies conducted by Americans themselves under the guise of sociology, political science, economics, business administration or other fields. Referring to these fields as "social sciences" grants them the aura of universality and allows a certain level of delusion about their universal applicability but they may as well be called "American and European Area Studies."

Those sciences arose and the concepts which define them took shape during the capitalist era, from within modern Western societies and the context of their histories. Through Western expansion, they were generalized to the whole world and presented to have a universality akin to that of the natural sciences. In the author's opinion, the critical analytical scientific methodology — supposed to be subject to constant criticism and review — is the only element of these disciplines for which universality can be presupposed

in rest of the globe. "American Studies," the focus of this paper, is never classified as another form of area studies: "the West" divided the world into distinct regions in an exercise of "knowledge as power" and external control, but "the West" itself does not come under its remit. Here, we must warn against ignoring the universal dimension of science and its yearning for value-free critical knowledge; indeed, knowledge can also serve as power and as a force opposed to the power that initially harnessed it. It must also not be forgotten that myth and ideology may also constitute a potent source, tool and manifestation of power. What these examples illustrate is that "power" and authority are not the defining hallmarks (differentia specifica) of scientific knowledge.

Regardless, from the perspective of Area Studies as tools of power and control, Europe and the United States as regions do not represent objects for categorization and study. American Studies has, according to its self-definition, devoted itself to researching the specific characteristics of America and American culture. At home, it has served to crystallize a specific American cultural identity and relied upon an exclusivist America based on a stereotype typified by the middle-class white male of European descent. Abroad, the exportation of American Studies came within the framework of the effort to export the American model in opposition to the communist model. That is, it headed beyond America's borders in the form of research centers and university departments as part of the conflict with another model striving for hegemony. The justification for American neo-imperialism essentially relied on the export of American-style democracy and its civic virtues, disguising US economic and political interests. Although leftist and liberal intellectuals often played a major role in American Cultural Studies after World War II, they played this role from within the context of spreading American culture.⁽¹⁷⁾

Area Studies were established for the purposes of control and hegemony in parts of the world other than Europe, the United States and Canada.⁽¹⁸⁾ An

16 It's maybe worth noting that there is now an increasing following of soccer among young Americans; this tends to be rooted either among white suburban upper middle-class families or Latin American migrants.

17 John Carlos Rowe, "Areas of Concern: Area Studies and the New American Studies," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31, The Other Americas (2011), p. 12, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3uifSle>

18 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

illustration of how real and dedicated this official effort was is given by John Carlos Rowe, who describes the process by which the US government established, and which directed the National Research Council and the Social Science Research Council to form a research board for the ethnographic study of areas and ethnicities outside the United States. "Carl E. Guthe, the anthropologist who chaired the new Ethnogeographic Board, characterizes it as 'a non-governmental agency established in the name of the scientists and scholars of the country for the purpose of aiding the government.'"⁽¹⁹⁾ Rowe goes on to write that, "The work of the Board is characterized by Guthe as 'interdisciplinary in scope, seeking to use the facilities and knowledge of the earth sciences, the biological sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.'"⁽²⁰⁾

In my opinion, a more genuine critique is to state that what is termed the "social sciences" in these dominant countries is in fact another form of area studies; their generalization to the rest of the globe was part of a wider process through which cultural hegemony was extended. I do not deny that Western social sciences are useful and that their scientific elements, related to methodology as derived from theories and quantitative and qualitative tools, which merit generalization, but this does not apply to their perspectives, topics, debates and agendas as a whole which, today, are exported wholesale to academic institutions outside the United States and Europe. The flipside of the globalization of American Studies should be the "Americanization" and "Europeanization," or, "Westernization," of the social sciences and humanities. This entails the explicit acknowledgment of their "location," and the recognition of other efforts to understand man, society, and state in other locations and languages, and in interaction with the former.

I believe that there is nothing extraordinary about the wish of non-American specialists in American Studies to study the United States in the way that the American academy studies their own countries and regions: through the prism of anthropology, history, political science, economics and other disciplines

that are eclectically combined in the Area Studies instituted at American universities, through the same institutional processes which codified the social sciences more generally. They would like to study the United States as a region: society, economy, politics and culture. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that these researchers will soon discover that they are frozen out. Their isolation is understandably strange and surprising because the United States is omnipresent by means of the influence of its policy in the researcher's country and of its popular culture, from fast food to movie characters, the heroes of networks' series, and computer games. So why are there no institutions in their countries specializing in the study of the United States?

The question seems meaningful until the answers come as other questions: why would their country invest in studying the United States or even Europe? These Western countries offer their own ready-made knowledge, freely imparted to others in the form of the social sciences and humanities, just as they offer up scholarship on the East in the form of Area Studies, anthropology, and orientalism. If the aim of area studies is to study societies as a subject for domination and direct control, and to determine the appropriate tools for doing so, then it is not a realistic objective for the governments of the putative researcher's home country to pursue.

The ruling regime of the state to which these academics belong to — let's suppose this is an Arab state — would never dream of controlling the United States. At most, the regime would like a say in how it is dealt with by Washington, and seek to exert some influence on its foreign policy. When its thinking extends beyond meetings with US officials to having an influence on policymaking in Washington itself, it will hire an American PR agency or consider connecting with existing pressure groups in search of a common interest. In this way, when these putative Arab officials seek to influence the United States, they will instead be influenced by the US through their need to reproduce the dominant rhetoric that is said to be useful in the US itself. In special cases,

19 Ibid., p. 15.

20 Ibid.

foreign policy overlaps with the American home front as in the case of Zionism and Israel, Cuba and Mexico, and perhaps Ireland, where it becomes possible to work via strong communities linked by a religious, cultural or otherwise special relationship with those states or via powerful pressure groups in the economy. In such states, some forms of American Studies can emerge, but they are not usually relied upon for formulating policy towards America. I do not believe that Israel relies much on American studies, but on the experience of its friends in the United States, and American academia itself. Those who want to research American affairs from this perspective can integrate into the American academy.

Arab regimes try to win over Washington by persuading the US of their value as allies, and of the need to preserve the stability of these regimes against both internal and external threats. They do this through their lobbying efforts, either directly with policymakers or through public relations firms. Inter-Arab conflicts play a significant role in driving competition to please Washington. This does not require in-depth studies of US society and politics; the superficial generalizations of politicians, journalists and think tanks will suffice. It is also a self-perpetuating praxis. One of the most pervasive assumptions is that "Jews control Washington," and therefore the shortcut to gaining Washington's favour is to gain Israel's favour. This is what some Arab states are competing to achieve at the time of writing of this paper. And that is what informs their efforts. So too do Eastern European states, perhaps as inverted residue of anti-Semitic ideologies, who fawn over Israel, perhaps inspired by some belief in the omnipotence of Jewish groups in running the United States. Since Israel is the beneficiary of this presupposition, which it would call anti-Semitism in other circumstances, it encourages it. It encourages Arab governments to believe this, driving forward ever-greater concessions on Palestinian rights. This is a self-feedback loop: as countries compete to curry favour with Washington via Israel, Israel's power only grows.

An American researcher would find no success in promoting critical, methodical American studies to regimes in the Arab region, Eastern Europe or in the broader Third World. Such regimes are not interested in a critique of American society, but in convincing Washington that they are reliable allies, or in other cases, showing that Washington's policies are undermining the said government with regards to its people. Attempts to shape American public opinion, meanwhile, are generally left to democratic and revolutionary forces against authoritarianism, which in general have previously failed to win the sympathy of Washington. Instead, they try, if it is within their capacity, to influence the grassroots base of politicians. Such forces rarely succeed in this endeavour unless they have the support of a specific societal sector, as the Anti-Apartheid movement and the democratic forces in Latin America had. In other cases, they are unlikely to succeed since their opposition to Washington's foreign allies makes them an easy target for demonization taking into consideration that the majority's general disinterest in foreign affairs means that it is highly susceptible to a hegemonic doctrine.⁽²¹⁾ American public apathy and the simultaneous willingness to accept dominant narratives of foreign affairs were strengthened during the conflict with communism and during the "war on terror." It is thus easier to link adversaries of allies to an external enemy. A new Phenomenon that might be good news for democrats who look for allies in the US is what I would like to call the "ethical turn" of the youth movements and protest initiatives. They are concerned with moral values and justice free from ideologies and ideological camps.

Those who are actually fighting America have no interest in trying to persuade it to modify its policies, nor are they interested in containing them. They might need to study America if there were a minimum of parity in the conflict with it, as in the case of putting forward a counterexample to the American model. They would study American society, economics and politics in search of weak spots to attack as part of psychological

21 Demographic changes in the US since the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and political changes after the Vietnam war has seriously challenged that status quo but did not change the hegemony of the official foreign policy in shaping American public opinion towards international issues.

warfare, or they would study the kind of losses that hurt American society and the American system.

In the absence of any degree of parity, as was the case of some armed movements in South America in the last century, the Vietcong, and finally Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, ignorance of America ends up being more "useful" than knowledge. When it is assumed that zeal based on will and faith is the main driving

force, due to the big discrepancy and imbalance of power, it might be better to rely on ignorance. Study and knowledge might affect the will and determination, for two reasons. Firstly, knowledge leads to the realization of US strength, which by far exceeds the weaknesses that might be sought or sensed during fighting. Secondly, getting to know the others runs the risk of humanizing them.

On Transnational American Studies

The debate over the nationality of American Studies seems to have arisen after the address to the American Studies Association (ASA) given by its then-president, Janice Radway in November 1998. Radway questioned the meaning of the label of "American Studies" in an era defined by globalization, postmodernism, and post-nationalist identities.⁽²²⁾ Radway's address provoked many reactions over the identity of American Studies. In 2001, after the events of 9/11, Americanists highlighted the renewed importance of American Studies. Anglo-American relations, with their special status, enjoyed renewed importance and the concept of nation-building was reintroduced as a strategy of intervention in other countries, while theories such as Huntington's "clash of civilizations" returned to the forefront.

Academics felt that the original emphasis of American Studies on cultural studies and attention to the American character represented the original identity politics of the US. Cultural studies, however, had already shifted from a kind of "identity politics" into an academic space for radical criticism⁽²³⁾ and to the study of ordinary people and their history. The 1980 book *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present*⁽²⁴⁾ by American historian, social critic and political scientist Howard Zinn (1922-2010), was without a doubt the most important, seminal book in this genre; through it, an entirely novel narrative of

American history was presented. Zinn's history was written from the point of view of the marginalized and unearthed much material that traditional history books failed to capture when glorifying the United States. It was also influenced by women's studies and the role of marginalized identities in the making of American culture. It also turned to the study of numerous cultures such as African American culture, Latin American culture, youth culture, and the cultures of women and other groups. That was a much-needed perspective to understand history. But if it turns to imposition of "political correctness" retroactively on history, it runs the counterintuitive risk that it might, in some cases, serve to turn marginalization to pluralism and falsely portray American history as more pluralist and inclusive than it really was, and this could serve to contradict its original critical intentions.

On another level we meet the increasing tendency to view America as only one part of a wider global system, which is a useful approach in studying America. American studies scholars embraced a version of their discipline which transcended national and linguistic boundaries.⁽²⁵⁾ These tendencies were an expression of the liberal culture of the educated middle classes in large urban centers, and which also prevails in the American academia. It did not take long for populist American cultural reactions to these

22 Astrid M. Fellner, "Crossing Borders, Shifting Paradigms: New Perspectives on American Studies," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2008), pp. 21-22, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/39GXPvp>.

23 Ibid., pp. 26-27.

24 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

25 Fellner, p. 34.

tendencies to take shape in the shape of the 2016 US presidential elections.⁽²⁶⁾

As a discipline, American Studies continues to face multiple challenges. Rowe, the American studies scholar discussed earlier, is the author of the 2002 book *New American Studies*.⁽²⁷⁾ In this work he sketches the development of American Studies over the previous quarter century, concluding that the discipline is not ready for the 21st century. Rowe argues that American Studies is in need of theoretical renewal, and that in future the field must take a post-nationalist outlook.

These scholars' proclamation of transcultural and the transnational thought, a rallying cry which was especially forceful amongst American Studies scholars at the beginning of this century, indicate a strong response to the mood that produced a theory of a "clash of civilizations," also born of American academia. This line of thought may even be an intended, intentional adversary to that theory, provided that its critical methodology is developed. American Studies regards the United States as a space for the interaction of cultures beyond the famous "melting pot," and not as the site of cultural conflict.⁽²⁸⁾ It presents an alternative to an exceptionalism rooted in the national character centred around a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ethnic core, however much that has adapted in recent decades to assimilate all those who have become "culturally American" rather than those who acquired citizenship through a history of immigration.

From another perspective however, "trans-culturalism" and transnationalism may become another face of imperialism, cultural domination and hegemony.

In fact, the view of the United States as a product of cultural interaction is not novel. American exceptionalism, which is much discussed and criticized in American Studies, is generally seen in

"the East" as a non-nationalist exceptionalism. That is to say, the United States was, for mainstream Arab culture, an example of a melting pot of immigrants. It represented not a nationalism, but a-nationalism. The critique of American exceptionalism⁽²⁹⁾ present in most critical American Studies therefore seems strange and bizarre in Third World states and even in Europe, where the United States was not regarded as "nation" in the ethnic sense at all. This view of America from afar as the a-national was comfortable and unchallenged until the symbols, discourse, imperialist character and wounded pride of American nationalism came to the fore with the events of 9/11. This of course wasn't the best answer to people who denied the existence of an American national character. The useful answer from which other people could benefit is that the US is a nation of citizens.

American Studies became a critique of narrow American nationalism from a cultural and aesthetic perspective, a counterweight to a narrow, exclusively WASP culture and a narrative history which depicts the United States as evolving along a clear arc from Puritanism to hedonism in the midst of abundance.⁽³⁰⁾ One scholar from within this new trend claims that the United States' position as a global leader not as a result of narrow American exceptionalism, but because of its multiculturalism, something which other less diverse nations do not enjoy.⁽³¹⁾ What she calls "Transnational America," in my view, could act as just another definition of empire. It is therefore important for American Studies to not merely become a manifestation of transnationalism, which could also function as the ideology of an empire.

The continued emphasis on the need for transnationalism may become an imperial culture of a state whose national sovereignty was founded and fortified behind the safety of two oceans. While it has the capacity to violate the territory of other

26 Jane C. Desmond & Virginia R. Dominguez, "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism," *American Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 48 (1996), pp. 475-490; John Carlos Rowe, "Post-nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies," *Cultural Critique*, no. 40 (1998), pp. 11-28.

27 John Carlos Rowe, *New American Studies*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

28 Winfried Fluck, "A New Beginning? Transnationalisms," *New Literary History*, vol. 42, no. 3 (Summer 2011), p. 368, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/39Mub0N>

29 John Carlos Rowe, "Edward Said and American Studies," *American Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March, 2004), pp. 35-37.

30 Fluck, p. 369.

31 Ibid., p. 370.

sovereign states, its own borders remain impregnable. The remaining theorization on this subject, such as acculturation processes, transnational capital, the globalization of communication media, etc., are not inventions patented by American Studies. In fact, transnationalism arose before the emergence of the term transnationalism, and the same applies to capitalist globalization and capitalist commodities flooding the pre-industrial and subsistence economies.

Winnifred Fluck portrays transnationalism politically as a tool of liberation and resistance against imperialism. By allowing individuals the chance to "dis-identify" from identity politics, transnationalism, for Fluck, allows an escape from identity-based polarization.⁽³²⁾ In fact, if we do not exercise caution at first by listening to the voices of the oppressed and the deprived in this world, who often fall back on identities as a weapon in the struggle against hegemony, transnationalism may transform into an imperial tutelage over the oppressed. The transnational arena, and the communicative space created as an alternative to narrow national identity, may become a sphere of domination and hegemony for the privileged, dominated by cultural imperialism, transnational capital, transnational corporations and other forms of economic and political control.

Professor Bernard Mergen wrote to Americanists: "We may resist the idea of national culture, but it remains viable and necessary in many parts of the world. Nor should we use transnationalism and globalism simply to disguise old domestic quarrels about capitalism and anti-imperialism. In short ... yes, American studies can be globalized, but perhaps not in ways we Americans would prefer."⁽³³⁾

In addition, transnational American Studies may become an escape route to flee the challenges of analyzing American history and culture in a way that goes beyond the identity-based agenda of new social movements: "The good thing about transnational American studies is that it allows us to look at the

United States no longer in an insular way but in terms of international embeddedness. But that is not yet progress in itself. It all depends on what conclusions we draw from this embeddedness."⁽³⁴⁾

One of the reasons for the dogged, continued absence of American Studies in the Third World lies specifically in its cultural facet. Those who want to study the United States should do so through what could be described as a "critical area studies" rubric; they are concerned with politics, economics, history, the tools of American hegemony, the various interest groups and lobbies within the United States, and yes, the political culture that influence its foreign policy. They are engaged in critique of American foreign policy, an endeavour that could lead to an interest in studying "America itself" and thus adding a new perspective to American Studies.

Area Studies, which were designed for the purposes of domination and hegemony in the Middle East and different regions of Asia and Africa and Latin America, has undergone radical critical upheavals at the hands of successive generations of specialists, but such upheavals were tamed by the same tools that made the change. This was undertaken through the "containment" of these trends within innocuous university departments and scholarly trends like "postmodernism" and cultural relativism. The containment of the criticism of the Area Studies and the policies they justify, its integration into the US academic mainstream and turning them into a piece in a pluralist American academy, allows the criticism to flourish, but it is also a means of neutralizing it, preventing it from becoming a challenge from within the culture in the countries that are studied. This allowed for criticism, often in English, far away from the real confrontation with injustice, underdevelopment and dependency, and far removed from the societies concerned and their language. That is not the critique that helps build alternatives to the Western Area Studies. So, the upheaval in Area Studies needs another shift in research approach to be fulfilled not in Area Studies, but in the *areas studied* themselves.

32 Ibid., p. 372.

33 Bernard Mergen, "Can American Studies be Globalized?," *American Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2/3, Globalization, Transnationalism, and the End of American Century (Summer/Fall 2000), p. 317, accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3CJWi4q>

34 Fluck, p. 381.

On the other hand, American Studies can undergo a genuinely radical shift if it moves from the negation of American exceptionalism through transnationalism to negate this negation⁽³⁵⁾ and returns to the praxis of American Studies within its borders. This is not, however, a return to nationalism and the study of symbols and their production, which was transcended with the first negation. Rather, what is needed is to transcend the transcension, through a return to the study of society, state and culture in the United States itself, to perform a critique of both the national and the transnational as dimensions of a complex social and cultural reality.

35 A Hegelian would express this meaning in the concept *Aufhebung* which means: abolish the negated/preserve elements of it/and elevate it to a higher level of development. Some philosophers translate this word as "sublate."

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