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Reflections on American Studies: New Horizons and Perspectives in the Academic Study of the USA

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International Conference of the University of Guelma – Algeria (October 29-30, 2018)

The State of Teaching and Research in Literature and Civilization

New Realities, New Perspectives and Approaches

Title of the talk:

Reflections on American Studies

New Horizons and Perspectives in the Academic Study of the USA

Abstract

Winfried Fluck views American studies as an “interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States” (9). Globally speaking, this field of research focuses on American culture by incorporating, as Fluck infers, the study of a wide range of academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, ethnology, literature, popular music, sociology, politics, economics, to mention but a few. The aim of this talk is to examine the scope and implications of American studies and to provide a clear insight into how useful and important this academic branch is for students of English. Firstly, I will give a definition of American studies and its development. Then, I will point out how this field of research is eclectic by relying on the case study of US poverty during the Great Depression. Finally, I will propose a model of American studies for the “common good” since this relevant pluridisciplinary field of research may help students understand the complexities and the challenges of the real-world of today and particularly when the USA is involved in an ambiguous and a hegemonic way.

Key words: American Studies - Pluridisciplinary - Great Depression - Artworks - Common Good

Outline

Introduction

- 1. What is American Studies? Overview and Historical Background**
- 2. How is American Studies a Pluridisciplinary Branch? (Poverty during the Great Depression: A Case Study)**
 - 2.1. Reading American Studies: John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath***
 - 2.2. Watching American Studies: Cinema (John Ford), Painting (Grant Wood) and Photography (Arthur Rothstein)**
 - 2.3. Listening to American Studies: Dust Bowl Ballads of Woody Guthrie**
- 3. Why Should Students Care about American Studies?**

Conclusion: Contradictions and Paradoxes of America

Introduction

This talk will develop some reflections on American studies. This field of research is one of the courses included in the curriculum of the department of English. It is also called American civilization, following common usage in the Algerian university context.

My aim is to examine the scope and implications of American studies, and also to provide a clear insight into how useful and important this academic branch is for students of English. But first I would like to stress that I will articulate my vision from the *what*, to the *how*, to the *why*. My concern here is to give answers to three basic questions that represent the framework of this talk:

- What is American studies?
- How is it a pluridisciplinary branch and how can one apply an innovative approach in the study of the USA?
- Why should students care about this field of research?

I think that once we are clear about the ‘what’ as we have agreed on one definition of American studies, we can move to the ‘how’ by showing the way students can conduct researches about the study of the USA. Finally, the answers to the first two questions lead us to the ‘why’ which is probably the most challenging question because here we are investigating the purposefulness of learning American studies at the department of English and we are trying to seek if there is a cultural value that may be added to the scientific capital of students.

I have divided this talk into three parts. Firstly, I will give a brief definition of American studies and its development. Then, I will point out how American studies is a pluridisciplinary branch by relying on the case study of US poverty during the Great Depression. I will show how several disciplines are involved in the study of one specific issue of the USA. In fact, I will assume that some extra sources like literature, popular music, cinema, painting and photography can be helpful for students in addition to the usual sources they rely on. I will demonstrate that conducting researches can be done by reading, watching, and listening to American studies. Finally, I will indicate some implications of learning American studies at the department of English by arguing that some current issues can provide food for thought for all of us who are interested in the study of the USA.

1. What is American studies? Overview and Historical Background

Let me start with a definition of Winfried Fluck who suggests that American studies is an “interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United

States” (9). Globally speaking, this field of research focuses on American culture by incorporating, as Fluck infers, the study of a wide range of academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, ethnology, literature, literary criticism, aesthetics, popular music, linguistics, sociology, politics, economics, to mention but a few.

Fluck uses the term “interdisciplinary” which denotes the idea that we integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines using a real synthesis of approaches. The term interdisciplinary can be used interchangeably with the term multidisciplinary or pluridisciplinary, but I prefer using the latter which is defined as “embracing several disciplines or branches of learning” (*Oxford Dictionary*). The term pluridisciplinary denotes the idea that we engage in a scientific process that clearly requires expertise from a broad range of different disciplinary domains.

It should be said that American historian Vernon L. Parrington founded American studies with his 1927 academic work *Main Currents in American Thought*. He describes this field as follows: “I have undertaken to give some account of the genesis and development in American letters of certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American. [...] In pursuing such a task, I have chosen to follow the broad path of our political, economic, and social development, rather than the narrower belletristic” (9). By analyzing several letters of the Founding Fathers from colonial times, Parrington offers a political history of the United States that celebrates America’s identity and its main ideals such as: democracy, liberty, the frontier, and US exceptionalism.

Subsequently, Henry Nash Smith formed a course of study entitled “History and American Civilization” in 1940, setting an academic American studies program. In the fifties, the methodology of American studies adopted what was known as the “myth and symbol” approach, developed in Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950) and subsequently in Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). The turning point in the development of American studies is known as the “Great Divide” which occurred in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Leo Marx 6).

Up until the mid-seventies, scholars focused on myths and ideals of America. This practice of American studies was viewed as positive, holistic and nationalist. Scholars stressed the exceptionalism and the uniqueness of American identity; however they had a tendency to ignore the bitter realities of American history such as slavery, oppression of women and workers, and the stigmatization of ethnic minorities. But after the Great Divide, scholars started paying attention at some issues related to immigration, multiculturalism, women, Native Americans, and African Americans.

After this brief overview of American studies, let's move to the second question and show how American studies is a pluridisciplinary approach and how can students rely on artworks in the study of the USA.

2. How is American Studies a Pluridisciplinary Branch? (Poverty during the Great Depression: A Case Study)

American studies is a field of research which involves a wide range of scientific disciplines. Stanley Bailis views it as “eclectic and pluralistic” (15). In the following section, I will show that researches in American studies can be conducted eclectically by involving several areas of study. To achieve this, I will rely on the case study of US poverty in the Great Depression Era.

In 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed causing the beginning of the Great Depression. It was the most devastating economic crisis of the United States and was subsequently worsened by the Dust Bowl during the thirties¹. Millions of Americans lost their jobs, their farms and faced poverty. This depression would plague the USA and many other nations for almost a decade.

The academic research on Great Depression in the USA is typically conducted through scholarly books and articles and I think that this issue can be addressed through the prisms of American artworks, namely literature, cinema, painting, photography, and popular music. Students can conduct researches on the USA by reading, watching, and listening to American studies. I will show that the artistic works of novelists, filmmakers, painters, photographers, and songwriters on the Great Depression may allow students to learn this era through different perspectives.

But it important to note that before examining the representations of Great Depression in US arts, students need to have expertise in history since they will examine the most devastating economic crisis of the United States in the thirties. Similarly, a research on poverty during the Great Depression will examine the *New Deal*, a series of programs instituted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to stop poverty and restore prosperity to Americans in the thirties. Students need also to analyze the rhetoric of the US President on the issue of poverty. We all remember the optimistic words of FDR in his first inaugural address as he asserted that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”.

Students should take a look at the socioeconomic condition of tenant farmers, also called okies (people from Oklahoma), who immigrated to California to make a living, but also examine the condition of African-Americans and other minorities during the Great Depression. They should have some background on trade union, US anarchism and the political activism of that period.

Similarly, they need to read articles of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* that dealt with Great Depression and its devastating consequences.

Finally, they must analyze the topics of poverty, disillusionment, and social injustice from a philosophical standpoint. In order to do this, they read the works of Greek philosopher Epicurus who emphasized the good of pursuing happiness. Additionally, they examine the ideas of contemporary thinkers like Karl Marx, George Orwell, and John Rawls.

I have gone on so long and I apologize for that, but my point is that American studies is undoubtedly eclectic and pluralistic and any student who wants to engage in researches on the USA must have expertise in several disciplines. The next three sections indicate the implications of artworks in the study of the Great Depression in the USA.

2.1. Reading American Studies: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Students working on poverty during the Great Depression should definitely be familiar with the literary work of John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). I am not going to analyze Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel; rather I will show how this masterpiece of American literature can provide food for thought and be used as an extra source to develop reflections on the topic of the research.

Nevertheless, what can be said is that Steinbeck portrays the plight of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression Era by tracing the fictional Joad, a farmer family of Oklahoma who moves to California in search of a better life. Tom Joad (played by Henry Fonda) takes leadership in the family, forms a labor union, and kills a deputy who assassinated his friend and godfather former preacher Jim Casy. Tom runs away and embodies the Great Depression anti-hero who fights against oppression and injustice.

The themes and symbols of *The Grapes of Wrath* may help develop reflections on the issue of poverty during the Great Depression. First, the novel delivers an accurate account about the condition of the American working class in the thirties. Then, the novel deals with the system of tenant farming which has been important in the USA from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. Students may analyze the social exclusion of tenant farmers who were driven from their land by drought, economic hardship, and bank foreclosures. Finally, the novel of Steinbeck helps understand the way in which union workers organized and opposed the Federal government as Tom Joad typifies working class America, an inspirational figure for all the workers.

2.2. Watching American Studies: Cinema (John Ford), Painting (Grant Wood) and Photography (Arthur Rothstein)

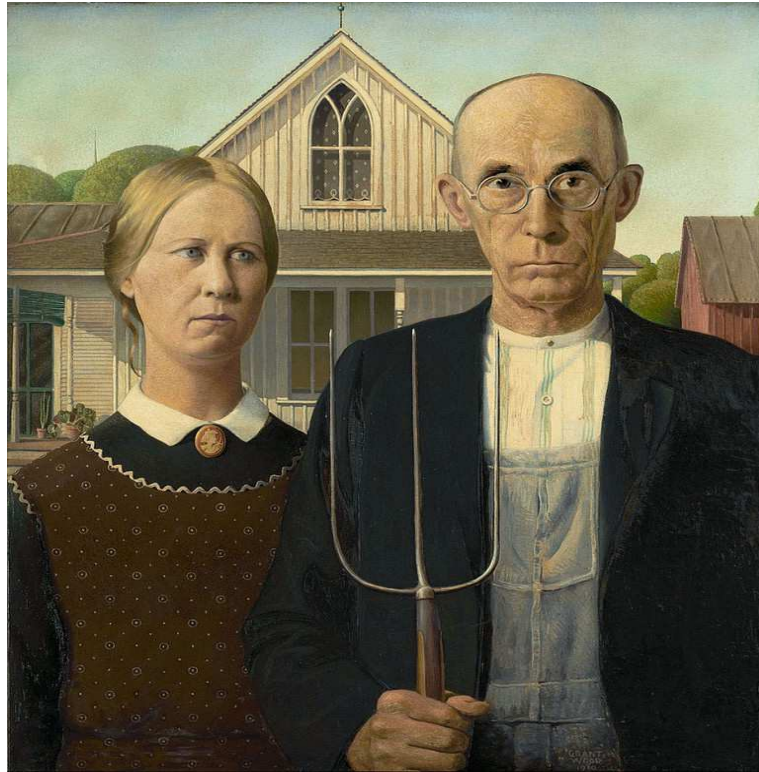
Students may also rely on some visual arts such as cinema, painting, and photography which may help them develop some reflections on Great Depression poverty. There is no room here to analyze in depth the visual materials that I have chosen, but I will only focus on some important aspects that I consider relevant for the analysis.

Students can watch *The Grapes of Wrath*, a 1940 American film directed by John Ford and based on John Steinbeck's novel of the same name. The film follows the book fairly closely but the ending is quite different from Steinbeck's novel. In fact, the film has a more optimistic view than the book, especially when the Joad family ends up in a good camp provided by the government.

I consider that watching this visual art can be helpful for our students in various ways. First, the film is practical and particularly when one doesn't have enough time to read a 313-pages novel. Additionally, the film depicts a matriarchal Ma Joad and emphasizes her pragmatic as she keeps the family united. Students may examine the situation of women during the Great Depression and the role they played among worker families. The following excerpt is the most memorable moment in the motion picture. Tom (played by Henry Fonda) tells his mother, Ma Joad, he plans to carry on Jim Casy's mission in the world by fighting for social justice.

I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere—wherever you can look. Wherever there is a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there is a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. And when the people eat the stuff they raise and live in the houses they build, I'll be there too (John Ford)².

Similarly, students can decipher the messages and the aesthetics of paintings which portray the gloomy atmosphere of the Great Depression. For instance, let's examine Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930) (See below).



American Gothic (© Grant Wood, 1930)

We can see that the man is holding a pitchfork and his daughter is dressed in colonial print apron evoking the American puritan spirit and the birth of a mythical America. The painting celebrates small town life in the rural landscape of America. The small town is viewed as a mythical theme in American culture. It is a geographical space situated in the rural landscape of America, but it is also a utopian community that symbolically recreates the Jeffersonian agrarianism of pioneers who proudly explored the frontier and survived the bitterness of the wild environment through their genius, resourcefulness and exceptionalism. It should be noted however that this Calvinist quest of establishing colonies in the newly discovered continent of North America had its dramatic drawbacks since millions of Native Americans lost their lives and millions of Africans were enslaved and shipped to the New World.

Gertrude Stein assumes that Grant Wood's painting was meant to be "a satire of rural small-town life" (*The Vintage News*, 2017). The painting is a critical depiction of rural America as it tries to construct an imaginative aesthetics that is alternative to conscious reality of Great Depression and industrial capitalism. So, students can explore poverty during Great Depression by analyzing paintings that evaluate the distance between rural small town life and American realities of the thirties.

Finally, students can have a look at a wide range of photographs of the *Farm Security Administration* which portrayed the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Roy Stryker, head of the Information Division of the federal agency (*FSA*), hired several photographers, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell lee, and Gordon Parks, to name but a few, to report the plight of poor farmers during Dust Bowl and to create authentic images of the Great Depression in the United States.

The following photograph of Arthur Rothstein represents an iconic image of Great Depression Era and Dust Bowl (see below).



© Arthur Rothstein (*Dust Storm*, 1936)

The picture represents a farmer and his two sons during a dust storm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936. The black and white picture has a very simple composition and still it is very powerful because it shows the American individual of the thirties in relation to his environment. Rather than abandoning their home and move to a less hostile place, the farmer and his two sons choose to live in difficult circumstances. Examining the aesthetic photograph of Rothstein provides students with a clear view of the plight of American farmers who needed the government's assistance. They can also rely on other photographic sources of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange who depicted the beauty of the landscapes of America despite the hard times of the thirties.

2.3. Listening to American Studies: Dust Bowl Ballads of Woody Guthrie

The Great Depression witnessed several musical styles such as folk music (Woody Guthrie, Almanac Singers, Lead Belly), African-American Gospel music (Ella Fitzgerald, Mahalia Jackson, Louis Armstrong), Blues (William C. Handy, Skip James), and Broadway musical songs (Bing Crosby, Boswell Sisters). Popular music in the United States helped people forget about their daily problems and particularly in the midst of the Great Depression.

Students may rely on some songs that address social injustice and depict Americans who suffered from poverty, unemployment and deprivation during these hard times.

Woody Guthrie is certainly one of the most significant figures in American folk music. He was known for his protest songs on the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Several folk singers have followed his footsteps to social and political activism including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Bruce Springsteen among others.

His Dust Bowl ballad “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore” (1940) discusses the desperation of a hobo, a homeless vagrant who was affected by the Great Depression.

I ain’t got no home, I’m just a roamin’ ‘round,
Just a wanderin’ worker, I go from town to town,
And the police make it hard wherever I may go,
And I ain’t got no home in this world anymore (1-4).

The song of Guthrie is simple in structure. The narrator uses the language of common people which is characterized by deletions, contractions, and no grammatical agreement. Students will realize that people who faced poverty in the thirties were pejoratively depicted as belonging to the uncultured classes. The narrator laments the difficulties that he has encountered in trying to make a living during the Great Depression. Both the guitar and the harmonica create a gloomy atmosphere that reinforces the hopelessness of the protagonist.

Students may analyze the lyrics of the song and focus on the topic of homelessness in the USA during the Great Depression. They can allude to the fact that two million homeless migrated across the country and lived in “Hooverilles”, those shantytowns that they built and named after President Herbert Hoover who was widely blamed for avoiding federal intervention during the Great Depression. Students may also highlight the fact that during the Great Depression some protest singers engaged in and wrote about what was going on in the world around them. Woody Guthrie attempted to capture the anger of the Dust Bowl refugees who had lost their homes.

Perhaps, his protest songs on the Great Depression did not change the world, but at least they gave Americans a reason to hope for a better future.

3. Why Should Students Care about American Studies?

I come now to the third and fundamental question: why should students care about American Studies? To answer this question, I need to discuss the implications of American studies pragmatically from a broader sense in our real life.

I think that American studies may help students understand the complexities and the challenges of the real-world of today and particularly when the USA is involved in international issues that have a direct impact on different countries. Therefore, learning American studies should be more than getting high grades at university.

America is involved in an ongoing state of political and military tension with Russia that some commentators have called the New Cold War or Cold War II. This undeclared war may terribly affect peace all over the world. Additionally, The US president recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the US embassy there. Moreover, the Trump administration decided to withdraw funding for the United Nations refugee agency that helps Palestinian refugees. The US withdrawal will certainly have a negative impact on the population of Palestine. In addition, the United States is one of the world's largest polluters and its president has announced that Americans intend to withdraw from the climate agreement which regulates greenhouse-gas-emissions. Finally, the US president signed an order, often referred to as the Muslim ban, which temporarily suspended the admission of immigrants coming from some Muslim countries. Thousands of people all over the world gathered to protest against this unethical decision. Naturally, it goes without saying that these issues that I have just stated deserve a deep examination since they have a direct impact on our daily life.

I then propose a model of American studies for the "common good" which may help us reflect on the moral beliefs and the challenges facing us in a contemporary world where the United States occasionally acts in an ambiguous and a hegemonic way.

On the other hand, students of the English department need more than traditional sources to conduct relevant researches on the USA. I have previously suggested that integrating artworks may be of a great help to our students. In what follows, I propose some current issues that can be examined through the prisms of artworks:

- ✓ Portraying Single Mothers/ Arabs / Muslims in Hollywood
- ✓ US Global Capitalism in the Films of Oliver Stone

- ✓ American Presidents in the TV Show *The West Wing*
- ✓ US Poverty Today in the Photography of Mary Ellen Mark
- ✓ A Contemporary History of the USA in the Pop Art of James Jill
- ✓ What Can the Paintings of Mark Bradford Do for African-Americans?
- ✓ The America Dream and its Fulfillment in the Rock Music of Bruce Springsteen
- ✓ Police Brutality against African-Americans in Hip Hop Music
- ✓ US Heroism in Marvel Comics

These are just suggestions for future researches on the USA, but it must be said that the artworks mentioned here are to be considered as primary sources and not simply as extra sources in the research. Students may examine the artistic work and activism of singers, poets, painters, photographers, filmmakers, and authors who represent daily life of ordinary people and criticize contemporary capitalism and hegemonic corporations. They can focus on the empowerment of women, racial minorities and the most deprived people by analyzing questions dealing with social justice, passive revolution, discontent, civil disobedience and grassroots movement.

Conclusion: Contradictions and Paradoxes of America

I would like to emphasize the importance of the notion of “common good”. It suggests that the good of each student and researcher is intimately related to the good of the whole scientific community. We should then think about a model of American studies that promotes a global common good and which helps our students develop critical thinking regarding some current issues about the USA.

Similarly, I have deliberately avoided dealing with “how to teach” American studies in classroom. I teach English and I am particularly interested in the educational topics of designing a course, planning a lesson, motivating students, and implementing communicative language teaching, but my teaching philosophy is based on two principles: (a) we live in a “post-method era” as argued by H. Douglas Brown (2002); and b) students should always be provided with effective teaching, suggests Jack C. Richards (2002). Therefore, my deep belief is that there is no right way or pure way of teaching American studies, there is just teaching American studies.

In addition, one can argue against the pluridisciplinary approach. Naturally it is difficult for a researcher in American studies to be an expert in so many fields of studies. This is one of the weaknesses of any pluridisciplinary approach. Accordingly, one should have a broad general knowledge in several areas and have the ability to combine ideas from several fields of science. In short, students need to master the topic of their study so the vision will not feel superficial.

Finally, I think that the study of America must be done by exploring its ambiguities and paradoxes. I think one should juxtapose the myths and ideals of this country with its social and political realities. This can be achieved by measuring the distance between:

- democracy and *habeas corpus* (Guantánamo)
- Jeffersonian agrarianism and Hamiltonian industrialism
- The Promised Land and African-American ghettos
- Happiness of the middle class and disillusionment of the blue-collar workers
- American Dream and social injustice (poverty³ and homelessness⁴).

I shall conclude by stressing the fact that investigating the contradictions of the USA can be particularly fruitful and valuable. This reminds me of the lines of American poet Walt Whitman:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself;
I am large, I contain multitudes* (51).

Notes

¹ The Dust Bowl was a period of severe dust storms that damaged the ecology and agriculture of American High Plains (Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas). This natural disaster forced thousands of American families to leave their farms during the thirties. Many of them migrated to California to look for jobs and opportunities.

² Tom Joad's I'll Be There Speech on YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERif97cdMII>

³ In 2017, 43 million Americans had income below the poverty level (13.4% of the US population). See Alemayehu Bishaw and Graig Benson, "Poverty: 2016 and 2017", *United States Census Bureau*, September 2018 (Accessed September 22, 2018). URL: <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/acsbr17-02.pdf>

⁴ On a single night in 2017, 553 742 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States. See "The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress", *The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, Washington, D.C., December 2017 (Accessed September 22, 2018). URL: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

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