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Author(s): Enikő Bollobás

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Dangerous Liaisons: Politics and Epistemology in Post-Cold War American Studies

ENIKŐ BOLLOBÁS
Eötvös Loránd University

THE TOPIC OF THIS PAPER IS THE EPISTEMIC AND POLITICAL DIRECTIONS American studies has taken in the past decades. I will try to show that while in the United States and Western Europe the changes, originally triggered by the political movements of the 1960s, became epistemic by the 1970s and 1980s, east of the Iron Curtain these changes have only occurred belatedly, in the 1990s: the changes brought about by the political changes of 1989–1990 needed time to turn into an epistemic shift. But American studies, I will insist, is a veritable pull factor in this sense, boiling down to being a new methodology in the humanities and social sciences.

Of course, American studies seems to have played a rather special role in East-Central Europe from the start, different from the role of French or German studies, for example. Indeed, all along this has been a subversive role, American studies being a subversive field, its teaching a subversive enterprise. “Old American studies,” as one might call the first, Cold War phase of the discipline, was for a long time dangerous territory in East-Central Europe both because of its idealized message concerning “the meaning of America” and its structuralist-phenomenological methodology. “New American studies” that emerged towards the end of the Cold War and has been characterized by severe rifts and paradigm debates became problematic in East-Central Europe for its critical stance and its poststructuralist-postmodern-multicultural-

Enikő Bollobás is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. A version of this paper was given as a public talk at the University of California, San Diego in January 2002.

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post-hegemonic assumptions. In fact, both “Old American studies” and “New American studies” were problematic epistemically in East-Central Europe: the former for being framed by the modern episteme (at a time when no theoretical and methodological alternatives to Marxism were tolerated), the latter for being framed by the postmodern episteme (at a time when only structuralism was tolerated as an auxiliary to Marxism). Given the very different political and ideological developments in the U.S. and Western Europe, on the one hand, and East-Central Europe, on the other, the mission of post-Cold War scholarship includes a “sixties”-type politicization, where the 1960s must be *folded*, so to speak, into the 1990s. At home, this mission means the spreading of advanced ideas, and rests on the application of American studies as methodology. Internationally it can hold up a synthesis of idealism and pragmatism: of what I will expound as the “respect mode” of “old American studies” and the “attack mode” of “new American studies.”

East of the Iron Curtain the 1960s were not “the sixties” as usually understood: these 1960s were characterized by the tightening of police control and the lack of any civil rights politicization whatsoever. Here the 1960s was not the decade of emergent feminism, demands for social equality, or the critique of racism and sexism. At best, our 1960s were characterized by a belated disillusionment among leftist intellectuals in communism. This disillusionment was triggered by the Prague events of 1968—not the uprising but rather its crushing by Warsaw Pact tanks—occurring twelve years after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a landmark historical event with the potential for many of revealing the downsides of the communist system. So, the real “sixties” had to wait until the 1990s, after the fall of communism and its totalitarian regimes. Therefore, in East-Central Europe the intellectual had to “do the sixties” in the 1990s, when finally there emerged a demand, say, for both feminist activism and feminist criticism, for gay and lesbian consciousness-raising as well as queer theory, for social activism in general as well as the desire for a finer understanding and critique. Together with all these new activities and ideas often packaged in the United States, there came an unprecedented influx of U.S. products. U.S. business and cultural presence has proved equally difficult to figure out; this is where American studies is beginning to have a social role: to help identify what is desirable and what is not desirable to import—whether politically, socially, culturally, or concep-

tually. In order to be able to do this, American studies must substantiate both the appreciation and the critique of U.S. culture; it must, in other words, balance the “respect mode” and the “attack mode.” This balancing act is, I believe, the true meaning of the internationalization of American studies, so memorably and powerfully called for by Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez.¹

“Old American Studies”

The academic enterprise of American studies grew out of the sense of many scholars who found their own individual fields limited and restricting and wanted to escape their narrow focus. The first generations of American studies scholars—coming primarily from history and literature, but also from anthropology, linguistics, and other fields in the humanities and social sciences—were looking for a shared framework and dialogue with those in other fields of inquiry about “America.” This shared framework is basically those grand claims of the “myth-and-symbol school” about which there was consensus: its elements include the “New World,” “American exceptionalism,” “nature’s nation,” the “American Adam,” as well as the “American mind,” ideas that had developed in various forms in intellectual history such as Puritanism, Transcendentalism, Individualism, Progressivism, Pragmatism, or Liberalism. The “myths and symbols” were the grand metanarratives themselves and were employed for two separate reasons: to explain and to homogenize. First, they organized the previously unordered mass of material into figures, *figurae*, in order to satisfy that age-old desire of making sense and explaining American culture. Second, this generation of American studies scholars unmasked the underlying forces at work in order to prove the homogeneous, stable, uniform, and universally shared concept of America.

This framework was in place for the first twenty years or so, as long as memories of World War II were raw for Americans and Europeans alike. Indeed, for this war-generation nowhere was American exceptionalism more conspicuously visible than in the role the U.S. had played against Hitler and his allies—literally “saving the world.” The unambiguously positive stance the U.S. took on the war stage brought about a tremendous scholarly interest in that culture: people wanted to know what exactly those special qualities were that allowed for the victory of good over evil. This is what I call the “respect mode.” “Hitler

made Americanists of all of us," Harry Allen, one of the pioneers of American studies in Britain, recalled.² The European interest in American democracy and heroism was coupled with Washington's cultural diplomacy determined to transmit America's culture to postwar Europe. Prominent among the various mechanisms for the promotion of the scholarly enterprise of this transmitting, the Salzburg Seminar was established in 1947 at the Schloss Leopoldskron, soon inviting many academic celebrities, among them Alfred Kazin, F. O. Matthiessen, Wassily Leontief, Walt Rostow, Margaret Mead, Randall Jarrell, Henry Nash Smith, and Edmund Wilson. In 1985, when I had the fortune to attend, Emory Elliott, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Walton Litz were our lecturers. The Fulbright Program, another branch of international promotion, has been in existence for over fifty years now; in its first decade it brought such intellectuals to Europe as F. O. Matthiessen (Prague), Perry Miller (Leiden), Wassily Leontief (West Germany), Daniel Boorstin (Rome and the Sorbonne), Leslie Fiedler (Italy), Leo Marx (Britain and France), and Henry Steele Commager (France). There were also the Harmsworth chair in Oxford, the Pitt professorship in Cambridge, and then the Kennedy Institute in Berlin.

By the 1960s, of course, America lost its innocence both at home and internationally. This was so not because other cultures were less racist or sexist, but because the American self-image produced by the media about race riots, Korea, or Vietnam so very sharply contrasted with the previous ideal. As much as the individual had earlier been able to identify with the good cause of going into war with evil, by the 1960s no such easy identifications were possible. With the Soviet Union successfully snatching some of the ideologically best seats in the arena of political ideals, the U.S. chose to take seats next to obviously bad guys and filthy ideals. So by the time memories of World War II faded, no single player was left without blemish; the respect mode became ironic, obsolete, and outdated.

"Old American studies" bears the rather obvious marks of its times: that of phenomenology in search of universal patterns governing appearance and—even more so—structuralism inspired by models of linguistics, with its focus directed to some common deep structure of cultures, where the workings of the surface reflect more significant underlying forces. Humanist authors such as F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, Vernon L. Parrington, Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Leslie Fiedler, and Roy Harvey Pearce attempted to uncover collective

images and symbols that could be used to explain the behavior of all people in the United States. The search for underlying deep structures allowed for the formulation of such metaphysical claims as, for example, the Leo Marxian pastoral ideal, supposedly embodying the “meaning of America,” or even Barbara Welter’s groundbreaking “Cult of True Womanhood,” identifying the four behavioral attributes that were universally admired: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Obviously, the aim itself—that of uncovering “depth” and “deeper meanings” in the form of symbols and myths underlying and ordering phenomena—is very much in tune with the episteme of the modern age. Indeed, the consensus so characteristic of the first phase of American studies can be largely explained by its participation in paradigms of the modern episteme, especially its “fundamental depth models” of inside/outside, essence/appearance, latent/manifest, among which structuralism seems to be *the* depth model *par excellence*.³ Such unitary concepts as the “idea of America,” the “American mind,” the “Puritan mind,” or the “American intellect” all reflect the consensual emphasis laid on the center as controlling structure, on depth as determining surface, on the unseen as governing the seen, and the universal as manifest in ephemeral and contingent events. Within this epistemic framework, it was easy to identify the all-national in the individual, to give homogeneity to the heterogeneous, uniformity to the diverse, or stability to the variable.

The View from Eastern Europe

At this time, East-Central Europeans were little aware of the developments in the U.S., let alone understanding their epistemic context. All that this first phase of American studies produced was forbidden fruit to them. First, this was the height of the Cold War, and American studies was actually the product of the Cold War, except from the other side of the—cold—trenches. Clearly, the “meaning of America” was not to be explained in the respect mode, by such *figurae* as the American Adam, the Virgin Land, the city upon a hill, the different drummer, or the errand into the wilderness. Second, at this time phenomenology and structuralism, together with psychoanalytic and myth criticism, to name just a few theoretical frameworks, were untolerated alternatives to Marxism. They were understood to be products of bourgeois ideology that ignored the Marxist significance

assigned to “social reality” and explained phenomena in terms of linguistic, mythic, psychoanalytic, or consciousness models not grounded in traditional social reality.

What never really reached the authorities so desperately trying to censor Americanists in East-Central Europe was the fact that by the 1960s, the establishments attacked by the various civil rights movements actually included the “old American studies” establishment too, the establishment that was instrumental in constructing the scholarly vision of American exceptionalism. If they had only realized that it was American studies itself, tuned to the “attack mode” of “new American studies,” as already practiced in the U.S. and Western Europe, that could have actually provided intellectual fodder for their desired critique of the U.S.—its hegemonies, imperialism, racism, sexism, etc.—they might have supported it. But then, there were those new epistemic differences that probably posed greater problems than ideology or politics.

For decades after World War II, the eastern part of Europe was hermetically sealed from the West. The cultural commissars held a firm grip on what people were to read, write, talk, or think about. My own personal experience was that this grip hardly eased by the 1980s even: in 1982, upon returning from the U.S., *all* my books were confiscated at the border, Solzhenitsin, Churchill, Betty Friedan, and Robert Duncan alike. Only the commissars could give a green light to what books were to be translated and published by state-owned publishing houses, intricately overseen by censors of many kinds.

This control resulted in many erasures and absences, which became especially painful in a country like Hungary, for example, that for centuries before had had a book market rather sensitive to European currents. Hungary’s professional classes then demanded, as well as guaranteed, that the major intellectual events of Europe and America find their way to Hungarian readers. A typical example is Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, which first appeared in French in 1835 in Paris, three years from that, in 1838, in New York in English, and another three years from that, in 1841, it appeared in Hungarian in Pest. Or, at a time when German was commonly spoken by the educated classes of Hungary, Nietzsche, Freud and Jung were immediately translated for the general public. The few democratic years after World War II saw a booming of translations as well; people were starved to read what they could not during the war, so Walter Lippmann, Wendell

Wilkie, André Maurois, George Marshall, St. Vincent Benét, and Henry Steele Commager were immediately translated and published between 1945 and 1948. This intellectual appetite is especially striking if we consider the starvation, or diet at best, that was again to come in the next several decades.

It is interesting to see what could *not* be translated and published in Hungary during the years of communism. Which authors were not supposed to be read? My list is tentative and random, but perhaps gives an idea of what was missing from the cultural currents of this once thoroughly European country. Among the unavailable excluded authors were such philosophers and thinkers as Nietzsche, Whitehead, Toynbee, Cassirer, Dewey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Bataille, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Bachelard, and Baudrillard. Of the psychologists, Freud only reappeared in the 1980s (at least in part), Jung, Erikson, and Maslow not at all. What is especially painful, such Hungarian-born giants as Sándor Ferenczi, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Lipót Szondi, Arthur Koestler, Károly Kerényi, or Karl and Michael Polányi could hardly be read in Hungarian. Saussure had to wait fifty years to be published in Hungarian, Wittgenstein forty. Martin Buber and Elie Wiesel were too Jewish to appear at all; Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner were probably too Catholic. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps too disobedient and non-cooperative. Betty Friedan and *all* the others too feminist. Literary censors refused to allow Ezra Pound to be translated in a separate volume.

What was the critical menu offered during the years of communism like? The Marxist rule during the 1950s and 1960s basically meant the hegemony of a very rigid and conservative Marxism, preoccupied primarily with rewriting literary history according to direct political principles. The great Marxist metanarrative assigned some transliterary “essence” to literature, thereby making of literary tradition a compendium of ideas and misconceptions reflecting some socially-ordered center. By the end of the 1960s, Marxist aesthetics became exhausted in its hegemony and allowed for the emergence of two groups of seemingly strange bedfellows: the tiny circle around Lukács and the various forms of structuralism. But literature could not become a battleground for ideologies, and without an open debate—the attack mode—the social and structural hegemonies embedded in Marxism and structuralism could not be critiqued and questioned. By the time poststructuralism emerged in the West, structuralism was finally a

tolerated alternative in the East that in fact extended an arm to Marxism at the time when the Cold War began to thaw. Structuralism offered a singular framework that seemed to subscribe to, and at the same time, defy Marxism. The defiance consisted primarily of ignoring the social strata, or, more precisely, replacing it with language. But in spite of this seeming defiance, structuralism revealed a fundamental kinship with Marxism and the political power it legitimized in East-Central Europe. Indeed, in its effort to find order everywhere, from kinship systems to poetic devices and forms, its insistence to locate knowable patterns all around, structuralism fit very well with Marxist orthodoxies, only here it was the linguistic and not the social that served as a vehicle of this order. (Also, structuralism was deeply rooted in the Slavic world, and the cultural commissars responsible for censorship were not always clear about the dangers that might lurk behind such names as Jakobson, Mukarovsky, Shklovsky, or Todorov.) The methodological conservatism of structuralism in East-Central Europe can, in this light, be understood as the result of its ties with rationalism embedded in exactly those strategies of power and control that were later critiqued by post-structuralism.

An anecdote might reveal something of the political atmosphere of communism. Michel Foucault visited Hungary only once, in 1966, to speak at a conference on structuralism. Afraid that Foucault might be a loose canon, the communist authorities decided to have him speak to an audience of the trusted few only, in the office of the Rector of Eötvös University. In response, Foucault refused the ritual visit to György Lukács, preferring to see instead Manet's portrait of Jeanne Duval at the Museum of Fine Arts. His interpreters, who were actually Hungarian scholars of French literature, were desperately trying to prove to the authorities that Foucault had strong ties with the left, so they showed them the announcement of the publication of *Les mots et les choses* in the communist Louis Aragon's journal, *Les lettres françaises*. Foucault himself made two unexpected discoveries: that structuralism—because of its roots in Prague and Russian Formalism—functioned as an alternative to Marxism and that Marxism here was officialized into a powerful state ideology. “J'étais un peu ému en voyant que la pensée du cher vieux Alth venait jusqu'au tréfonds du marxisme de steppes.”⁷⁴ “I was somewhat moved to see the thoughts of dear old Alth to have penetrated so deep into the Marxism of the steppes.”

“New American Studies”

I will turn to “new American studies” now, and the time in the U.S. when the discipline grounded in the modern and structuralist notion of literature and history opened up towards a more pluralist concept of culture. This is the time when the old metanarratives were replaced by new *fabulae*, narratives that were de-centered (or had many centers), de-privileged, de-hegemonized, exhibiting traits of diversity and post-coloniality, and reflecting an awareness of the social and discursive processes that produce “reality.” Scholars across the field began to explore especially the constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and class, starting with the production of marked configurations—the African American, the woman, the homosexual—but soon going on to the absent traces of inscriptions of race, gender, and sexuality. It became clear that the naturalized, and thereby unmarked, categories such as whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality were produced through discourses, texts, practices, and institutions. The grand metanarratives of a supposedly monolithic culture have all been discredited by the emergent attack mode; history and culture now being reclaimed as sites of the “‘big lies’ of the colonizer.”⁵ Concepts such as post-coloniality and counter-hegemony signal the decentered field of the postmodern episteme. Among the new and radically alternative scholarly configurations, literature appears to have lost its primacy among the multifarious texts and discourses studied by Americanists and has begun to be used as one of several intersecting and conflicting points of language, power, institutions, and social practices that produce social and cultural perceptions and meanings. However, as I will point out later, literature is in the process of regaining its importance (if not primacy) exactly because of the figuring of the postmodern episteme in American studies. Scholars have ceased to claim to have the power to uncover how things “really” *are*, but rather how things are being produced or constructed—as well as perceived, represented, imagined, or fictioned.

“New American Studies” and the Postmodern Episteme

Of the complex web of possible features that might be considered to make up the postmodern episteme in American studies, I would like very briefly to discuss three, whose roles appear to be the most decisive

in bringing about the paradigm shift in American studies. These are the following: (i) the loss of center, (ii) the privileging of process over product, and (iii) the disappearance of the signified.

As scholars proclaim the ethos of “cultural contestation” and practice what we might call a post-multicultural perspective, both the unitary idea of America and all politics based on one identity-marker are being refuted.⁶ In this context, the disappearance of center is perhaps the most obvious feature in “new American studies.” The national metanarrative of the first era—supposedly proving the superiority of one set of ideas and one way of life to others—was replaced by a multiperspectival approach insisting on the permeable boundaries between or the simultaneity of several knowledges, identities, postmodernisms, criticisms, or feminisms. “‘Central’ topics are now studied through paradigms and contexts which erode the very idea of ‘centrality,’” Mary Helen Washington remarks.⁷ Without any privileged center and with what Gubar calls the “multiplication of categories of alterity,” sites of inquiry are neither central nor marginal, but multiple and polyphonic.⁸ Several equally valid frameworks complement one another in today’s American studies: postnational, feminist, African American, Chicano, Asian American, Native American, gay and lesbian, queer, and other epistemologies interpret and explain a multiplicity of U.S. experiences.

In American studies, the postmodern privileging of process over product has been translated into a steadfast interest in the way certain states of affairs come about. As Houston Baker puts it, “theory is occupied preeminently with assumptions, presuppositions, and principles of production rather than with the orderly handling of material products.”⁹ In this respect, the critical is being reconnected with the historical. Texts, discourses, phenomena, and events are being investigated in terms of *how* they produce meanings rather than *what* meanings they might be said to contain.

An important element of this overwhelming interest in process and production is that the seeming transparency of any historical entity is being questioned. No quality is taken for granted or as naturally given; rather, every marked or unmarked feature, meaning, or configuration is viewed in its evolution, its production, and its construction. Phenomena are not taken to be frozen or fixed but are viewed from metalevels as *created*.

“We traffic in representations and consume images,” Gregory Jay remarks.¹⁰ Indeed, some of the most epistemically powerful books have

been those that deal in how representations and images produce the world we live in. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is actually a history of the discourse on sexuality; women's histories are often histories of representations of women; histories of racism are often histories of images and talk about race. Books that we hold most timely and influential have been exactly those that explore the various discourses that produce our world. For example, *Without Sanctuary*, the collection of lynching photographs edited by James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack, is preeminently representative of "new American studies."¹¹ The organizers of the 2000 New York exhibit portray the iconography of racism and white supremacy by tracing the process whereby these forms of all-encompassing hatred have been produced.

I tend to see a new momentum in American studies. Along with the exclusive interest that texts and discourses receive, literature can be legitimately expected to regain some of its former centrality. With so many key works in "new American studies" using literature as a base for drawing conclusions about the social, cultural, or political context, and with literature as "that mode of discourse which knows its own fictionality," as Jonathan Culler puts it,¹² literature will have a very good chance of appearing as an exemplary mode of discourse, where models of concept and knowledge production can be identified. In a world where *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, everything is, indeed, literary.

The Postmodern Episteme in the East-Central European Context

Finally, in this last part I would like to revisit the situation in East-Central Europe, pursuing this time the question of how American studies, framed by the attack mode of "new American studies," can be practiced in postcommunist countries with a long legacy of rigid Marxism and equally rigid structuralism. In general, one might say that those various pockets of society that are receptive to the postmodern episteme are growing in size and number, but there is still a very deep and probably unbridgeable rift between generations and intellectual circles. Not only is there a difference between a more rigid older generation and a more open younger generation, but similarly there is a visible clash between foreign language departments, on the one hand, and the departments and scholarly communities who necessarily rely on Hungarian translations of basic texts framed by the postmodern

episteme, whether in philosophy, literature, history, or other fields. One might also add to this latter group the “public sphere of the humanities,” made up of intellectuals—editors of non-scholarly, non-critical journals—not affiliated with universities. Also, there is the obvious difference between scholars with a German orientation and those of a French-English-American perspective, which will be rather difficult to bridge in the future.

All the absences in publishing that I described earlier have created an extremely distorted intellectual life. There were too many missing links within the international intellectual community. Thawing began in the late 1980s, but only after the decisive changes of 1990 did state censorship completely disappear. Today everything can appear—and everything does indeed. Publishing, both scholarly and popular, is a booming industry. Still, foreign language departments play a special role in disseminating contemporary ideas.

As to the first epistemic element, concerning the loss of center, the legacies of both Marxism and structuralism, as well as patriarchal nationalism, are immensely counterproductive. Obsessed with order and control, totalitarianism could not tolerate diversity or pluralism or anything that fell outside or questioned this order. Along with the madman, the clown, and the gay, the experimental writer and the political dissident were the very types whose idiosyncrasies monolithic ideologies could not take into account. Marxism and structuralism helped power and politics marginalize and pathologize the figures of excess of violence, playfulness, madness, erotica, and sexuality and thereby licensed their subordination or exclusion. In an environment where Marxists have indulged in ignoring and denouncing poststructuralism, as well as theories of multiculturalism or post-multiculturalism, the notion of a centered structure, of a system with a central signified, as well as the foundational claims of metaphysics, still await being widely questioned and discredited.

As such, outside the academic audience academic multiculturalism has a highly subversive aura and it is still very difficult to make the public accept the “potentially antihegemonic multicultural presences.”¹³ The academy, for this reason, became more radical than much of the “public sphere” of literature, and higher education has a fundamental monopoly on this knowledge production. Of course, this applies to a rather peculiar set of scholars; those, I would say, who are neither former Marxists, nor vehemently anti-Marxists; neither passionate anti-

West nationalists, not stiff-lipped western elitists. Former Marxists will demand that arguments include “class struggle” and the “reflection of reality,” while anti-Marxists will say that they have had enough of quotas and positive discrimination; anti-westerners (among them, anti-American nationalists) will refuse to “turn with every new Western notion,” while western elitists will demand “high culture,” “quality literature,” or plainly: “LITERATURE” (instead of, say, women or gay writers). Indeed, these scholars—Marxists and anti-Marxists, anti-West nationalists and western elitists—became strange bedfellows in their culture war *against* multiculturalism and the post-multicultural perspective of multiple identifications, feminism, sexual identity, queering, and mixing.

I have often found that the second episteme component, that production and process are privileged over product, poses less of a problem in East-Central Europe—partly perhaps because epistemologically it allows for the possibility of a big performative leap. What I have in mind is that in certain situations it seems more productive not to argue about basic assumptions that challenge supposedly ultimate and foundational knowledge but rather help make students, readers, or colleagues see how phenomena are being produced.

Let me cite some examples. In the late 1980s, one argued about gender equality or sexual freedom; for example, I was involved in a rather passionate public exchange of ideas with a writer about the “legitimacy” of feminism, about whether feminists were “murderers of motherhood and the family” or not. As opposed to this political activism and the clearing of grounds, the 1990s thing seemed to be to make one’s potential opponents read and discuss texts from the intellectual history of women or teach feminist criticism. Or, if one must enter into political debates, it seems more productive to discuss, for example, possible policies concerning gay marriages or transsexuals adopting babies than about the acceptance of gay and transsexual persons. Often, instead of insisting on the “aesthetic value” of women writers, it seems more helpful to teach or discuss experimental women writers, and “smuggle in” gender issues only later, after their “benevolence has been captured,” so to speak.

In a less radical, non-academic, environment it often helps to skip the sensitive labels—like feminist or gay—and simply perform certain conceptual operations without self-reflectively naming the act itself. For example, in discussions of constructions of the female self or forms

of literary misogyny, I have encountered more understanding audiences when I skipped alienating buzzwords such as *feminism*, *heterosexism*, or *heterosexual/homosexual matrix*.

The third episteme component, which concerns the signifier/signified dichotomy, has perhaps remained the most problematic in an environment that failed to produce poststructuralism. Indeed, for the older generation socialized in Marxism and Marxist structuralism and those of the younger generation who do not read foreign languages or did not have access to foreign publications early on, it is very difficult to accept that the binary structure of the sign disappears, that “reality” and “things” have given way to “mere” discourse, that “the notion of experience drops out of the picture, to be replaced by a concern with ‘language’ or ‘discourse.’”¹⁴ Or, as Foucault himself puts it in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, that “one remains within the dimension of discourse.”¹⁵ With Marxism insisting that art is a “reflection of reality” and structuralism insisting on art ordering and making sense of reality, a big leap was indeed necessary to conceptualize—without the appropriate thinking and discussion process leading up to it—art as not a representation of something outside but as one of the many discourses that produce what we perceive as reality.

Indeed, in the postmodern age it has become impossible to write a history of the referent; one always ends up engaged in the history of discursive objects: in how history is “fictioned,” in the history of objects as they emerge in discourse. The “things” are being “depresentified”¹⁶ as the existence of a reality that precedes discourse—together with an objective, or in Richard Rorty’s words, “God’s eye view,”¹⁷ of that reality—is being questioned. “An age does not,” Deleuze interprets Foucault, “pre-exist the statements which express it, nor the visibilities which fill it;”¹⁸ “truth,” he goes on, “is inseparable from the procedure producing it.”¹⁹ Indeed, not too many East-Central European scholars are receptive to this line of thinking.

However, I would like to mention one of the more unexpected ways in which the disappearance of the signified becomes an epistemological marker in a East-Central European humanities environment that was only recently very politicized. It concerns how and why the practitioners of the discipline have become more *committed*. Of course, intellectual commitment is not a new phenomenon: intellectuals have always been committed to ideals, works, and artists; the best teachers always showed a reverence for the work of the intellect, and shared a

love for and responsibility to teaching and learning. But this kind of intellectual commitment is different: it brings politics into the classroom and research in a more direct way, since it goes beyond true understanding: it seeks to generate personal change. Therefore, the committed intellectual—by refusing to take the accepted state of affairs granted—is seen as an instrument of change, the academia as the site of subversion.

The intellectual commitment fostered by the postmodern episteme aspires to be rather sophisticated; instead of direct political action it propagates the understanding and critique of the often extremely subtle and diverse forms of domination, hegemony, and imperialism. This also means that personal stakes and positionality compete today with the understanding of the forms of hegemony as factors motivating intellectual engagement.

How will this commitment figure in the scholarship coming from East-Central Europe? In order to answer this question, we must remember that no civil rights movement could shape the social history of this region. The paradigm of the radical teacher subverting culture only emerged with the fall of communism, although it now has a twofold mission: to raise awareness of social wrongs and civil rights while also teaching the complexity and subtlety of forms of oppression, domination, and hegemony. This is so in American studies as well; what we had missed since the 1960s had to be retraced in the 1990s, both knowledge and critique of U.S. culture. Of course, it would have been nice to go through the mentality changes of the “sixties” in the 1960s, but our situation has its advantages too: instead of creating belatedness, this imperative (of folding the “sixties” into the 1990s) seems to bring about a balance of idealism and pragmatism, a parity of the respect mode and the attack mode.

The mission that East-Central European scholars of American studies pursue at home derives from the third episteme component: they not only verify—in a post-communist and post-Cold War environment—the existence of an American Civilization by “importing America” (to pun on Richard Horowitz’s expression) but are instrumental in the *kind* of civilization they *produce* by dissemination. By elevating such ideals as counter-hegemony, (post-) multiculturalism, or de-centered internationalism, by naturalizing cultural products of formerly marginalized and “othered” groups like African Americans in the U.S., the Roma in Eastern Europe, or gays and lesbians wherever, the

scholar rearranges signifiers that produce other signifiers—until, perhaps, this production takes the place of what was formerly known as the signified. Intellectual work will not just trace the production of realities but will itself produce different realities, and this is the closest any intellectual can hope to come to changing the world.

The mission of the American studies scholar in East-Central Europe includes the spreading of advanced ideas in an intellectual environment that did not itself produce them, and to import them and test them in very different historical, social, and cultural contexts. Indeed, many of us outside the U.S. feel that today, American studies is really as much about “us” as “them.” *De te fabula narratur*, one remembers. In this sense, internationalization will mean decontextualization and recontextualization, ideas put to work outside the U.S. context until American studies becomes a methodology that will be applicable to different humanities environments.

The hope is that the intellectual assumes the role of the one-time umpire who first listens to his two younger colleagues boasting about their so-called professionalism, their respect for “truth” and “reality,” and then claims, “I call them the way they are,” and “I always call them the way I see them.” It is to them that our most seasoned umpire, the radical intellectual, responds: “They aren’t, until I call them.”

NOTES

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1. Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez, “Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism,” *American Quarterly* 48 (Sept. 1996), 475–90.

2. Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 112.

3. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” in Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), 318.

4. Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, “Biographical Notes” in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 28.

5. Frantz Fanon, quoted by Wahneema Lubiano, “Mapping the Interstices between Afro-American Cultural Discourse and Cultural Studies” in Winston Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2000), 645.

6. By post-multiculturalism I have in mind that “patchwork” of “moving identifications” which Susan Gubar describes in the first chapters of *The Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000).

7. Mary Helen Washington, "Disturbing Peace: What Happens to American Studies if You Put African American Studies at the Center?" *American Quarterly* 50 (Mar. 1998): 7.
8. Gubar, *The Critical Condition*, 34.
9. Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Theoretical Returns" in Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory*, 421.
10. Gregory S. Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997), 28.
11. James Allen, Hilton Als, Hon. John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, eds., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).
12. Jonathan Culler, "The Literary in Theory" in Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 290.
13. John Trombold, "The Uneven Development of Multiculturalism," *Profession* (1999): 243.
14. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 191.
15. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Random House, 1972), 76.
16. Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 223.
17. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in Lawrence Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 577.
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988), 48.
19. *Ibid.*, 63.