

## Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies)

### I

The title of this essay may seem curiously obsolete in the age of transnational American Studies, as if there were an unwillingness to acknowledge that American Studies is trying hard to cast aside notions of American exceptionalism and to deal with American culture no longer within the borders of the nation-state but transnationally. In effect, my title could be construed to illustrate what Amy Kaplan has called “the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism.”<sup>1</sup> I am aware of this danger, but from my point of view the assumption that theories of American culture and transnational American studies stand in opposition to each other is misleading, for, despite the self-perception of many of its practitioners, transnational American Studies are still theories of American culture. In the final analysis, they have the goal of making us understand American culture better. One is reminded of a similar case, the well-known postmodern claim about the end of grand narratives which was itself presented as yet another sweeping, grand narrative about the postmodern condition. What happened was not that we had come to the end of grand narratives, but that one grand narrative – the Hegelian or Marxist one – was replaced by another one created by postmodern theory. Similarly, the concept of transnational studies does not mean that we have come to the end of American Studies and of theories of American culture, but that prior versions of American Studies and American culture are replaced by new versions. In this sense, transnational American Studies continue to be, in the words of Alice Kessler-Harris, “a battle over the idea of America.”<sup>2</sup>

My point can be illustrated by reference to one of the classical calls for a transnational interpretation of American culture, Randolph Bourne’s essay “Transnational America,” in which he made the then bold claim that there is no distinctly American culture. And yet, precisely by making this claim, Bourne argues that American culture is different from other cultures,

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1 Amy Kaplan, “The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism,” *Comparative American Studies* 2 (2004): 153–159.

2 Alice Kessler-Harris, “Cultural Locations: Positioning American Studies in the Great Debate,” *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 299.

because it has developed under conditions of its own. Thus, his own characterization of the transformation of European culture in the U.S. continues to be a description of American culture – not, to be sure, in terms of a unified national identity, but nevertheless as a culture with characteristic features of its own: “We have transplanted,” Bourne asserts with confidence, “European modernity to our soil ...,” implying that in the process this modernity has taken on a new and different, in effect a unique form on American soil.<sup>3</sup> Bourne’s reinterpretation of American culture as a transnational culture thus remains a theory about the difference American culture makes: “America is already the world-federation in miniature, the continent where for the first time in history has been achieved that miracle of hope, the peaceful living side by side, with character substantially preserved, of the most heterogeneous people under the sun.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in this respect, America must be considered unique: “Only America” – remember that this is Randolph Bourne speaking! – “can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons why American Studies scholars are currently hesitant to acknowledge that, although American culture may not have developed autonomously, it has nevertheless developed under conditions of its own, is that they are afraid of being accused of exceptionalism. But there is confusion at work here. The term exceptionalism was coined to describe the ideology of a promised land and a chosen people. There is no logical reason, however, why, in rejecting this self-serving ideology, one also has to give up the idea that the development of American culture has taken place under conditions of its own – not necessarily conditions exclusive to the U.S., in effect, more likely conditions that are characteristic of modernity in general, but nevertheless conditions that are different in constellation and degree from those of other countries.<sup>6</sup> If we give up the goal of understanding and focusing on these different conditions, then we will be helpless in the face of a United States that, currently more than ever, is indeed dealing with other nations on conditions of its own.

3 Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” in *The American Intellectual Tradition, Vol. II: 1865 to the Present*, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 158.

4 *Ibid.*, 159.

5 *Ibid.*, 161.

6 This is not to claim that American society is “unique.” On the pitfalls of the term “unique” see Ian Tyrrell: “Many American historians have accepted these logical difficulties and argue instead either for national uniqueness or national difference. Since all national histories are unique, there is nothing objectionable about this maneuver, at least in principle. Yet ‘uniqueness’ does have overtones of national superiority, and the concept has been used, for example by David Potter, in a sense that clearly implies exceptionalism.” Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* (1991): 1034.

It goes almost without saying that the development of a transnational perspective is a welcome new research agenda in American Studies. Early American Studies, especially in Europe, might be characterized as a re-education project, because the main goal was to prove that the United States, the new world power and leader of the Western world, possessed a valuable culture of its own and could be considered mature and civilized enough for its new role. In order to support this claim, one had to define culture as deep and condensed expression of a unique, “specifically American” identity and of exceptional national virtues linked with it. To grasp, in contrast, to what extent this culture was shaped by cross-cultural exchanges provides a healthy antidote. In my own research, I have recently taken up the question of classical American realism again, but now in the context of transatlantic relations which, for a long time, were obscured or disregarded in discussions of American realism. Undoubtedly, such international contextualization can provide a much clearer grasp of American realism’s origin and adaptation of the realist project.<sup>7</sup> On the institutional level, transnational American studies have also brought about a notable change in attitude on the side of U.S.-American scholars and the American Studies Association toward non-U.S. Americanists who are now actively encouraged and invited to contribute their own point of view. In this context, special praise should be given to Paul Lauter, Amy Kaplan, Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Emory Elliott, four of the last presidents of the American Studies Association who have been instrumental in this long overdue internationalization of American Studies.

## II

However, if the project of transnational studies is to be taken seriously, it must also mean that scholars outside the U.S. do not just mimic the latest U.S.-American developments, but are self-confident and independent enough to develop their own perspective on them. This, in turn, means that we may be well advised to take a second look at the project of a transnational American Studies, as it has developed over the last years, even though we may be in basic sympathy with it as a new research agenda. Such a reassessment should start by looking at the underlying premises which have guided work in transnational American Studies and on which most of the work in this new line of research is based. This is actually what I mean by my title “Theories of American culture”: I am not referring to explicit theories – not

7 Winfried Fluck, “Morality, Modernity, and ‘Malarial Restlessness’: American Realism in its Anglo-European Contexts,” in *A Companion to American Fiction 1865–1914*, ed. Robert Paul Lamb and G.R. Thompson. (London: Blackwell. 2005). 77–95.

to work by Alexis de Tocqueville, Van Wyck Brooks, Constance Rourke, Margaret Mead, John Kouwenhoven or Sacvan Bercovitch, to name but a few – but to a system of underlying premises about one's object of study and the best way to analyze it. Consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, all work in American Studies, transnational or not, is based on such assumptions, because otherwise we would not be able to make meaningful claims about a particular object of interpretation within a larger context. In fact, we would not have any object. When I decide to interpret a novel by Toni Morrison or Ana Castillo, at first sight I seem to be far removed from an abstract issue such as "theories of American culture." However, there is no interpretation that is not embedded in a set of assumptions about why I have chosen this particular writer or novel, about whether and to what extent I consider her important for understanding American culture and so on and so forth. If she interests me as an ethnic writer, then such an interest is only meaningful in the context of assumptions about the role and importance of ethnicity in American society and culture which, in turn, imply, tacit assumptions about American society, its history, its power structures and the function of culture within the social system. Usually, we do not think about these matters, because we take our inspiration for the choice of a particular topic, writer or text from an already existing body of works, without thinking about the premises on which this work is based. However, as the recent critique of multiculturalism and its cooptation by the corporate state has demonstrated again, no approach is good or bad in itself. It always depends on what people are using it for.

If one grasps this basic hermeneutical insight, then one cannot ignore the fact that there never was a period or approach in the American Studies movement that constituted itself simply by the innocent goal of trying to understand and explain American culture and society. Interpretations always already stood in the service of a particular view of American society and culture and were designed to legitimize a particular attitude towards it. Take the founding movement of American Studies, the so-called myth and symbol school. In its more interesting and ambitious versions, as, for example in the work of Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Alan Trachtenberg, extending up to Richard Slotkin, the underlying goal, linking a range of very different studies on different topics, was to describe American culture as a modern culture with a specific potential for subversion and negation.<sup>8</sup> This,

8 The opening move for this approach was the redefinition of American romanticism as American Renaissance. But the methodological blueprint for almost all of the work of the myth and symbol school is contained in the (little known) essay by Leo Marx and his colleagues Bernard Bowron and Arnold Rose, "Literature and Covert Culture." Elaine Tyler May is right when she says in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association: "And although most of the myth and symbol scholars

in effect, was the basis on which the claim could be made that the United States had a culture worth speaking of. On the surface, the argument goes, American culture seems to perpetuate certain foundational myths such as the belief in progress or the regenerative potential of the frontier. But on a covert level, the major works of American literature are characterized by a unique potential for radical resistance, of saying "No! in Thunder." Without ever discussing these premises explicitly, the myth and symbol school thus drew on a modernist aesthetics of negation and negativity in order to give America "real culture." As Leo Marx puts it in the afterword to a recent reedition of *The Machine in the Garden*: "Nevertheless, *The Machine in the Garden* emphasizes a fundamental divide in American culture and society. It separates the popular affirmation of industrial progress disseminated by spokesmen for the dominant economic and political elites, and the disaffected, often adversarial viewpoint of a minority of political radicals, writers, artists, clergymen, and independent intellectuals."<sup>9</sup>

The critique of the myth and symbol school that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s raised all kinds of theoretical and methodological issues, but, in the final analysis, it was based on a fundamental disagreement about the underlying premise of the myth and symbol school, the possibility of aesthetic negation and the subversive potential of art. Leo Marx has recently provided a helpful description of what he calls the great divide in American Studies, and in the sense that a radical revision of our view of American literature and culture began in the 1970s, it seems fitting to use the term.<sup>10</sup> But there is also a striking continuity between American Studies B.D. and A.D., before the divide and after the divide, in the sense that the new radicalism did not give up the project of focusing on the possibilities of negation and subversion, or, to use a more comprehensive term on which I want to settle in the following argument, on the question of the possibility of resistance. All it did was to assess the prospects for resistance differently.

accepted the existence of a national consensus, they remained profoundly critical of it." Elaine Tyler May, "The Radical Roots of American Studies": Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 9, 1995," *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 187. The myth and symbol school was part of "an oppositional tradition that drew on American literature and culture in order to criticize American society as a civilization governed by shallow visions of progress and material success." Winfried Fluck, "American Culture and Modernity: A Twice-Told Tale," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 19 (2003): 69.

9 Leo Marx, "Afterword," in *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. 35th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 383.

10 Leo Marx, "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 19 (2003): 3–17.

Starting with Sacvan Bercovitch's redefinition of myth as ideology and American consensus, an amazing variety of revisionist approaches emerged in response to the myth and symbol school – from market-place criticism to new historicism, the New Americanists and their subsequent emphasis on the idea of empire. Despite their many differences, however, these approaches had one basic goal in common: they all wanted to demonstrate, although to varying degrees, that the idea of negation or subversion was a (liberal) illusion.<sup>11</sup> I have described this line of argument in a different context as transition from political to cultural radicalism. In political radicalism, dominant until the late 1960s, there are still institutions like progressive

<sup>11</sup> This argument is put forward in more detail and with full references in my essay "American Culture and Modernity: A Twice-Told Tale": "The main theoretical thrust of the revisionism ushered in by Sacvan Bercovitch's and Myra Jehlen's essay collection *Ideology and Classic American Literature* is to undermine claims of a possibility of negation: In the final analysis, they argue, dissent is really part of a ritual of consensus and, thus, coopted by the idea of 'America' [...] The different camps in the revisionism that emerged with Bercovitch's and Jehlen's reconceptualization of myth and symbol as ideology stand for various stages in the radicalization of this argument: In marketplace criticism, the market, for critical theory source and symbol of the alienating effects of capitalism, has also begun to invade the work of American Renaissance – and other high-brow writers (cf. Jean Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 67–100; Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985); in New Historicism, the point is no longer, as it still is in marketplace criticism, that even the writers of the American Renaissance could not escape the instrumental rationality of modernity, but that these writers, because of the power of their works, actually are especially effective agents of the system and hence complicit with it (cf. Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987). This line of argument is further radicalized in the book *Cultures of United States Imperialism* by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, and in Race and Gender studies, which insists that the texts of classic American literature are pervaded by imperialism, racism, and sexism. Moreover, their presence in the text is not a remnant of past prejudices, but actually constitutes the text's meaning, even where these texts do not explicitly deal with issues of race, gender, or empire. In order to identify this constitutive role of sexism, racism or imperialism, one therefore has to go to a deeper, covert level of the text. Critics working within Race and Gender studies, the imperialism-paradigm, and postcolonial studies thus reintroduce the idea of two levels of meaning but invert it: While in the myth and symbol school the double meaning of the text opens up the possibility of negation, it now reveals exactly the opposite, namely the illusionary nature of any hope for negation. In effect, the real horror lurks on the covert level, the former site of opposition, where things are worse than on the surface. Thus, the true extent of how deeply and comprehensively even an apparent art of negation is infected by the instrumental rationality of modernity is finally unmasked." Fluck, *ibid.* 69–71.

political parties, or the labor unions, or the student movement, or simply the institution of art, that hold a promise for resistance or negation. In cultural radicalism, such hopes are rejected as liberal self-delusions, because for this type of radicalism the actual source of power does not lie in particular institutions but in culture and its processes of subject formation.<sup>12</sup> Under these conditions, the only remaining hope for resistance could be minority groups on the margins or outside of the system, which have not yet been fully submitted to processes of subjection. The subsequent debates in race and gender studies, multiculturalism, and postcolonial studies can best be understood as discussions about the potential for resistance that these minority groups have.

### III

Seen from a focus on those underlying premises that have constituted and guided the field, American Studies, whether in its founding period or its current radical forms, have had basically one goal and one project, namely to investigate the possibility for resistance in American culture. This is not meant as a critique, however. On the contrary, with their project American Studies scholars are in good company in the humanities. The search for negation or resistance is by no means something that is restricted to American Studies. It is a dominant feature of almost all critical theories of modernity. In fact, if one steps back for a moment from the field of American Studies and looks at the emergence of the humanities as a professional field of study in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one might argue that without these critical theories of modernity and their search for negation or resistance, the humanities as a field of study would not have come into institutional existence and might not exist today. Let me briefly trace the outlines of this critical tradition in order to open up a new perspective on the development of American Studies and, eventually, also on the new research paradigm of transnational studies.

The founding idea of most influential critical theories of modernity lies in the writings of Rousseau and German idealism and their claim that the instrumental rationality of modernity, that is, rationality severed from reason, leads to human self-alienation. Philosophers after Hegel like Karl Marx, Nietzsche, Max Weber, Freud, Heidegger, Adorno and Horkheimer, but also Foucault, all follow this line of argument and make it the point of departure for their critical discussions of modernity. Where they disagree is

<sup>12</sup> Winfried Fluck, "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism," in *The Future of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman. (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 211–230.

in the description of the extent to which instrumental rationality has already affected and invaded the subject, her psyche and her body. This philosophical analysis of human self-alienation led to emphatic claims for the saving powers of culture (and, eventually, to the institutionalization of the humanities as the place where we can study and cultivate culture), because culture is seen as one of the few counter-realms that is not yet pervaded by instrumental rationality and thus holds a potential for resistance against the self-alienating logic of modernity. The reason why high culture and high literature played such a crucial role for intellectuals and cultural critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that they would finally become the centerpiece of the emerging philologies and still stand at the center of school and college curricula in the humanities, is not that these intellectuals were inherently elitist – many of them were not – and therefore drew on high culture and high literature as a welcome means of class distinction. The main reason is that, on the basis of their view of modernity, culture emerged as the main resource of resistance against what Max Weber would call the iron cage of rationality. However, culture could only play this role if it was not yet affected by instrumental rationality, in other words, if it constituted itself in, and through, negation. Modernism, as an aesthetic movement based on ideas of negation and defamiliarization, was a radicalized form of this view of culture as an adversarial counter-realm.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical theories of modernity were radicalized by cultural critics of the Frankfurt School such as Horkheimer and Adorno who gave the idea of instrumental reason an almost totalitarian dimension and then had to resort to hermetic avantgarde art as the only possible way to resist this totalitarian threat. This explains their chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (or Adorno's infamous essay on jazz music) which have both been rejected by the Cultural Studies movement as examples of a highly prejudiced, elitist approach to popular culture. However, such criticism never bothers to understand the reasons why these widely acclaimed intellectuals would take such a seemingly "undemocratic" stand. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the triumph of the American culture industry signalled the final collapse of culture's potential to overcome self-alienation, as it had been envisioned by Matthew Arnold and other cultural critics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because mass culture, as a highly standardized and commodified form of culture, seemed to demonstrate that the forces of instrumental rationality had finally invaded the last possible realm of resistance, that of culture. This fear explains the almost hysterical pitch of their comments on the American culture industry which put off a following generation like mine that had grown up with American popular culture in the post-War years and could not simply dismiss its own cultural socialization as pathological.

In this situation, it was Raymond Williams who showed the way out. Williams introduced the concept of "a whole way of life" as key concept in Cultural Studies in order to locate resources for resistance not in single objects but in a particular "structure of feeling," namely that of working-class solidarity. Single objects within working-class culture may be without any aesthetic merit and are often lacking in taste and artistic skill, so that no negating potential can be attributed to them. However, the context of solidarity in which they assume their function in working-class life transforms their cultural significance. Their true function can therefore not be assessed by an interpretation of single cultural objects but only through an analysis of the whole way of life in which they are embedded. This was an ingenious New Left attempt to re-empower the working-class as an agent of resistance. For Williams, working class solidarity holds a much better prospect for resistance than high art because it possesses a collective dimension that high cultural forms lack. In other words: Williams does not suggest to transform literary studies into Cultural Studies because, in quasi anthropological fashion, he wants to do justice to the full scope of cultural forms of any given society. He argues for Cultural Studies as an interpretative approach in order to describe working-class culture as an exemplary culture of resistance on which hopes for withstanding the instrumental rationality of modernity can still be based. However, in retrospect this search for an institutional or social base for a culture of resistance has been a story of constant retreat.

The development of British Cultural Studies after Williams provides a case in point. While Williams was still confident that the solidarity of working-class life would be able to resist the ideological impact of modern mass culture, Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* already struggled with the realization that this mass culture had become the dominant form of working-class culture, so that the potential of working-class culture for resistance appeared seriously compromised. The following development of British Cultural Studies can be seen as a long drawn-out struggle against this disillusionment. One way out was to continuously redefine, and, in the process, to narrow down, the social group that could still be considered as holding a potential for resistance, a trajectory that, after the disenchantment with the working-class in the Sixties, led to certain youth subcultures, and then, after the revolutionary potential of these subcultures had also been questioned by an increasing commodification of "dissent," to a redefinition of resistance as semiotic guerrilla warfare, as for example in Dick Hebdige's influential study on style in youth subcultures.<sup>13</sup> In American Studies, a similar move to the margins can be seen in the ongoing romance with ethnic subcultures

13 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1979.

and the tacit hope that they can take the place of the lost revolutionary subject, the working-class.

While the British Cultural Studies movement tried to uphold an – increasingly more diffuse – hope that a social base could still be found for resistance, continental cultural criticism, in merging Marxism and structuralism, put the analysis of modernity on new grounds by arguing that invisible forms of domination had become more and more pervasive and effective, so that, in an act of voluntary self-submission for which Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's Panopticon became the inspiration, people had unwittingly internalized the system's power effects and had subjected themselves to their own domination.<sup>14</sup> In place of "structures of feeling" and "lived experience," key concepts in British Cultural Studies, discursive structures of interpellation and subject positioning became the new focus of cultural analysis. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, New Historicism, and Race and Gender Studies, the major goal of analysis is to make visible this assignment of subject-positions and to explain how cunningly cultural texts manage to produce effects of subject formation and subjection, up to a point in some radical forms of Foucauldian and neo-historicist power analysis where resistance appears to be only another script of the system.

The different approaches within cultural radicalism have made some interesting suggestions to explain the puzzling phenomenon of the consent of the oppressed, but these suggestions have also created new problems. For, if power is all-pervasive, how is it still possible to think resistance? A comparison between Adorno and Foucault is instructive here.<sup>15</sup> Both of these critical theorists have provided powerful critiques of modernity in which the consequences of the enlightenment are radically reinterpreted: Instead of an emancipation of reason, we get a story of ever wider and more refined forms of systemic control. Both critics want to highlight the all-embracing nature of cultural forms of control by focusing on those dimensions of human existence that seem to be the most private, intimate and subjective, the psyche and the body. But whereas for Adorno the psyche is the realm where the deformation brought about by modernity is most consequential, because instrumental rationality has now also invaded the last possible source of unruliness, Foucault goes even further and considers psychic life itself as only an effect of the disciplinary regime of the body. This shift of emphasis is significant. The psyche, no matter how deformed and manipu-

14 Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. London: Penguin, 1977.

15 For a helpful comparison of these two major critical theorists, see the essay by Axel Honneth, "Foucault und Adorno. Zwei Formen einer Kritik der Moderne." In *'Postmoderne' oder Der Kampf um die Zukunft*, edited by Peter Kemper, Hamburg: Fischer, 1988, 127–44.

lated it may be under conditions of modernity, still retains a last potential for subversion, because from the Freudian perspective, the unconscious can never be completely controlled. Foucault, on the other hand, erases even this last, though already faint prospect for resistance by eliminating interiority altogether, so that the body, in quasi-behavioristic fashion, becomes the passive object of disciplinary discursive regimes.

Critics have pointed out that such a model of subject formation precludes any role for agency, but, what is perhaps more relevant, it also eliminates the nourishing utopia of Cultural Studies and American Studies, the possibility of resistance. It leaves the question unanswered what might prevent the insertion of individuals into the subject positions constructed by discourses of power. Thus, eventually even Foucault looked for a way out of the prison-house of discourse which he himself had constructed. In his late works, he finds a way to evade subjection by the forces of modernity through an ethics of self-care that is based on a pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment self.<sup>16</sup> The most influential revision within the Foucauldian paradigm, however, was provided by Judith Butler who locates resistance in moments of non-identity created by the need to secure subjection by means of reiteration – moments that also open up the possibility of resignification. All of this is well-known by now, to be sure, and I am referring to it here only in order to draw attention to a logic – a logic of constant retreat as I have called it – in the analysis of social and cultural power that leads straight to current debates in American Studies.

#### IV

Butler's solution of the resistance-problem has become a model for almost all of the following attempts in Cultural Studies to revive the idea of resistance without giving up the basic premise of cultural radicalism, that of an all-pervasive dominance of the system by means of discourses that create subjects and/or subject positions. Performance and performativity, the performative deferral of meaning, and the nomadic subject have all played a role in this. But the attempt to get out of the theoretical dead-end of subjection has also found expression in a theoretical move away from the concept of the subject to that of identity.<sup>17</sup> In effect, the idea of multiple or hybrid-

16 Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: the New Press, 1997), 281–301.

17 For representative examples of this "new cultural politics of difference," see Stuart Hall's essays, "New Ethnicities." In *Black Film, British Cinema*, edited by Kobena Mercer, 27–31. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988; repr.: *Stuart Hall*.

ized identities has become the new mantra in Cultural and American Studies on which all hopes for cultural resistance are now based. The reason is quite obvious: Under the highly pluralized state of modernity which Western societies have reached, it is no longer convincing to put one's hope on a particular class or a particular social group, a particular subculture, or even a particular semiotic practice. All of this would be essentialism. There is no longer an outside of the system. The best one can hope to achieve, it seems, are short performative moments of non-identity in which we escape reification. This is the best one can hope for, because all other potential sources of resistance have been used up: High culture and art, self-culture and subjectivity, even interiority and the unconscious, at different points all hopeful candidates for resistance, have fallen by the wayside, because one after the other has been unmasked as being already pervaded by the unrelenting logic of instrumental rationality and its systemic power effects.

In American Studies, we can observe the same trajectory of continuous retreat. Highbrow writers in the tradition of the American Renaissance who originally carried the hopes of the liberal tradition are now described as racist, sexist, imperialistic and complicit with the system. Avantgarde subcultures like postmodernism, or the idea of a subversive potential of pop art, have been discarded. For some time, American Studies put all hopes for resistance on marginalized groups and ethnic subcultures, until the critique of essentialism destroyed the equation of disenfranchised minority groups with resistance and left only the idea of a negating potential of flexible, multiple identities. All of this is the result of an increasingly radical and sweeping power analysis. If systemic power is all-pervasive, the hope for resistance can only be placed in the margins of that system, and if even the margins can no longer be expected to possess a quasi inbuilt oppositional potential, then only a flexible identity can function as a resort of last hope. This new utopia is often space- or territory-based, for example in the emphasis on border zones, diasporas, or intermediate spaces, because, as the argument goes, such spaces force their inhabitants to adopt several identities and thus seem ideally suited to create models of resistance. But, theoretically speaking, another reason may be even more important. If a multiple identity is a general condition of modern life, then there has to be a criterion for determining when that identity is progressive. Thus, the liberation from

*Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 441–49. London: Routledge, 1996, and “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 1–17. London: Sage, 1996, as well as Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.” In *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Trinh-ha, and Cornel West, 19–36. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

the trap of subject-formation often leads to a potentially crude materialism in which space determines identity.

## V

We are now in a better position to understand the reason for the emergence of transnational American Studies and its theoretical significance. This emergence can be seen as a consequence of Cultural Studies' and American Studies' ever more desperate search for a configuration or location that would still be able to provide an oppositional perspective. In that context, transnational studies can be seen as yet another attempt to escape the dead-end of cultural radicalism's power analysis. Since, theoretically speaking, all potential resources of resistance *within* American society have been used up, the only possibility that remains is to go outside of the nation-state and to transcend its borders. To equate transnational American Studies with comparative studies can thus be misleading, because it is not comparison per se which is of interest but only one that can help to transcend a coercive national identity and thus open up new perspectives for resistance. This becomes obvious and can be observed in exemplary fashion in one of the founding texts of the new approach, Carolyn Porter's essay “What we Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies.”<sup>18</sup> Clearly, Porter's call for comparative and transnational perspectives is not made for its own sake. It is made for a specific reason derived from her analysis of American society, her own theory of American culture so to speak. As I have argued in another context, “Porter's remapping of the field is her answer to what can be called the Bercovitch-problem in revisionary American Studies, the seemingly all-encompassing power of American ideology to absorb all critical perspectives, so that a revisionary American Studies in search of a truly oppositional perspective now had to go beyond national borders. Porter's redefinition and extension of American Studies is driven by the hope of regaining an oppositional counter-perspective, the ‘mezitizo legacy of Latin America focalized through the Caribbean.’”<sup>19</sup> The search for the ever-elusive revolutionary subject, which has led from the working-class to youth cultures and on to victimized subcultures within the U.S., finally leads to outside perspectives which need no liberation from false consciousness, because their location

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Porter, “What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies,” *American Literary History* 6 (1994): 467–526.

<sup>19</sup> Winfried Fluck, “Internationalizing American Studies: Do We Need An International Studies Association and What Should Be Its Goals?” *European Journal of American Culture* 19 (2000): 151.

outside of the system provides them with a critical perspective that remains resistant to ideological absorption by "America."

Others have made the same point. Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez, pioneers in the internationalization of American Studies, think "that critiques, alternatives, and experiments seeking to unsettle the links between the production of humanities knowledge and existing hierarchies of power have not gone as far as we believe is both warranted and possible" and hope that a critical internationalism will help to resituate the study of U.S. culture within an understanding of global dynamics, which would, in turn, better elucidate the inequities and oppressions that currently plague U.S. culture.<sup>20</sup> For Djelal Kadir, the founder of the International American Studies Association, America can be decentered by analyzing America from "non-American points of view" and "non-American national agendas."<sup>21</sup> In her response to his address, the then president of the American Studies Association, Amy Kaplan grants "that the project of (a critical) international American studies has the potential to undo the tenacious paradigm of American exceptionalism."<sup>22</sup> Consequently, it is not transnationality per se, which interests Kaplan, not my example of the development of American realism in a transatlantic context, but certain "transnational configurations, such as the borderlands, the Pacific Rim, the Black Atlantic, and multiple diasporas" – spaces, in other words, that hold a promise of resistance: "Paying attention to new archives and international collaborative work," Kaplan says, "has the potential to articulate new transnational sites for the production of knowledge that challenge the cohesive borders of a mythical America."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in the introduction to the essay collection on *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, edited by John Carlos Rowe, a more internationalist and comparative approach is recommended in order to contribute to "resistance to U.S. hegemony."<sup>24</sup> And for Paul Giles, the current president of the International American Studies Association, "transnationalism serves to reveal the parameters of national formations and thus to hollow out their pressing, peremptory claims to legitimacy."<sup>25</sup> Thus, transnationalism "involves an interroga-

20 Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez, "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism," *American Quarterly* 48:3 (1996): 476.

21 Djelal Kadir, "Defending America Against Its Devotees," *Comparative American Studies* 2 (2004); quoted by Amy Kaplan, "The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism," *Comparative American Studies* 2 (2004): 154.

22 Amy Kaplan, "The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism," 154.

23 *Ibid.* 155.

24 Barbara Brinson Curiel et al. "Introduction," in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 3.

25 Paul Giles, "Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspective of Postnational American Studies. Transnationalism in Practice." *49th Parallel. An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* 8 (2001): 1.

tion of the circulations of power";<sup>26</sup> it is an analysis of power relationships and in this, "can empty out the power relations that lurk ominously within these kinds of imaginary identification ..."<sup>27</sup>

## VI

One rationale for the hopes put on transnationalism is derived from a particular view of globalization. In the age of globalization, the argument goes, borders have become porous and permeable and this, in turn, has weakened American national identity and created an identity-crisis which should be regarded as a new chance for resistance. However, from a European perspective, American national identity may be temporarily in crisis, but the shock and awe produced by recent developments in the U.S. has resulted from the way in which the U.S. have responded to this crisis. The United States are a paradigmatic, agenda-setting modern society, and no talk about the crisis of the nation-state can distract from the fact that there is enough nation-state left to affect all of us decisively. Globalization does not mean that American power becomes porous or is going away. It means that it is reconfiguring itself and may emerge in consolidated and perhaps even more effective forms than before. Thus, it is still a major issue for the rest of the world whether, how and to what extent it is subjected to, or affected by, American power. In this situation, the original goal of the American Studies movement – the analysis of the cultural sources of American power – continues to be as urgent as ever and the dissolution of this project in transnational studies would be a major mistake.

What I am arguing, then, is that, far from going outside the U.S., we have to go back inside. Indeed, a claim can be made that the analysis of the United States has hardly begun, because the revisionism that has been dominant in American Studies in the last decades has focussed almost exclusively on refuting the liberal theory of American culture that stood at the center of American exceptionalism. However, critical concepts such as imperialism, capitalism, the state apparatus, even the term class, which were developed in the analysis of European societies, fail to grasp the historical constellations that have been developed by the United States: an empire that bases its power, Iraq notwithstanding, not on the occupation of territory but has developed unique, often barely visible forms of international dominance; a form of democracy that offers the amazing sight of a continued and stable dominance of business and social elites by way of democratic

26 *Ibid.*, 3.

27 *Ibid.*, 4.



legitimation; or the fascinating spectacle of a culture that has transformed an egalitarian dream into a relentless race for individual recognition, a phenomenon and historical transformation of culture that was first analyzed by Alexis de Tocqueville in the second volume of his *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville's study strikes me as still exemplary, not in its liberal premises, but in its approach to American society and culture, precisely because Tocqueville starts from the assumption that we do not really know yet what democracy in America really is, instead of assuming, as we have in the post-war years, that we always already know what it is, namely the opposite to totalitarianism, or, as in cultural radicalism, a mere cover-up of racist or imperialist designs.

Does this mean to fall back into a myth of American uniqueness? Perhaps it is helpful at this point to clarify what we are actually referring to when we use the term "American" in analyses of American society and culture, for after all, it is one of the major promises of the transnational turn to finally get rid of the exceptionalist spell of the term "American" and the self-centered, narcissist forms of self-congratulation often coming along with it. "American" in the exceptionalist version refers to particular national characteristics ("Wesensmerkmale") and particular national virtues. But there is another possible use of the word, in which the term "American" refers not to a mythic national identity but to a particular set of economic, social or cultural conditions that, for historical and other reasons, are different from those of other countries and nations. For example, the persistently strong role of religion in the United States is a by now rare phenomenon in Western countries and therefore an aspect of American society that we have to understand better, not only because of its theological, cultural, and social dimensions, but also because of its political consequences. This does not mean that we have to buy into the exceptionalist myth of a "city upon a hill." Nor does a focus on specific conditions of development prevent us from acknowledging and applying transnational perspectives, if they help us to understand the role of religion in the U.S. better. In fact, as Randolph Bourne had already pointed out, a strong transnational dimension is part of the special conditions under which American society and culture have developed. If we define American Studies as an attempt to understand how the American system, American culture and the idea of "America" work, we are free to draw on comparative perspectives where these may appear useful, but we are not obliged to focus on metaphors of marginalization as the key to understanding the U.S.<sup>28</sup>

28 To give but one example: The institute at which I am teaching in Berlin – the John F. Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin, an interdisciplinary institute consisting of six departments: history, political science,

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economics, sociology, literature and culture – has developed a graduate program on the basis of such considerations which will focus in systematic fashion on the analysis of contemporary American society and culture. For this, we have identified eight different research areas on which members of different departments will coordinate research and act as advisors: 1) American Exceptionalism in a Global Age; 2) Nation, Ethnicity, Diaspora, and Borderlands; 3) The Conservative Revolution and the New Social Movements; 4) The Struggle Over the Public Sphere: Media and Cultural Narratives; 5) Art, Aesthetics, and American Culture; 6) The Role of Religion in American Public Life; 7) Neoliberalism as a Cultural and Economic Paradigm; 8) Globalization and the American Centuries. Diasporic conditions and transnational aspects are part of this program, but they are not put at the center. It is hard to imagine such a comprehensive approach taken in an American Studies program in the U.S. at the present time, where American Studies has progressively dissolved into programs for the study of particular ethnic or gendered groups, a development that would be further intensified in hemispheric or similar studies.

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