

American Studies: “Discovery of America” or Discovery of Geography?

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Boian Koulov. AMERICAN STUDIES: “DISCOVERY OF AMERICA” or DISCOVERY OF GEOGRAPHY?

Abstract. The main goal of this work is to offer some possible conceptual explanations for the apparent estrangement between the scientific fields of Geography and American Studies. For this purpose, it discusses the relationship between the above academic subjects, in terms of the similarities and differences in how they constitute their objects of study. The author uses interdisciplinary approach and comparative analysis of their research content and determines that it is quite inefficient at best to rediscover “America” yet again. The conclusion posits that, rather than overlooking existing knowledge, it is of crucial importance that the American Studies field, as well as any other Area Studies field, to use the scientific insights, methodological experience, approaches, and results of the science of Geography.

Keywords: American Studies, Geography, Area Studies.

Боян Кулов. АМЕРИКАНИСТИКА: „ОТКРИВАНЕ НА АМЕРИКА“ ИЛИ ОТКРИВАНЕ НА ГЕОГРАФИЯТА?

Резюме. Основната цел на този труд е да предложи някои възможни концептуални обяснения за очевидното отчуждение между научните области „География“ и „Американистика“. За тази цел авторът дискутира върху връзката между тези академични предмети, най-вече по отношение на приликите и разликите в това как те „конструират“ своите обекти на изследване. В работата се използва интердисциплинарен подход и сравнителен анализ на тяхното изследователско съдържание, като се подчертава, че е твърде неефективно, в най-добрия случай, да се претоткрива още веднъж Америка. Заключениеето гласи, че вместо да се пренебрегват съществуващите знания, е от решаващо значение изследванията в областта на американистиката, както и всяка друга област на изследване на страни и райони, да използват научните познания, методологичния опит, подходите и резултатите на географската наука.

Ключови думи: американистика, география, изследвания на страни и райони.

Conceptual Research/Концептуално изследване

Introduction

This paper investigates the apparent paradox that geography, a traditional academic discipline, which studies the regions on the Earth's surface, is seldom employed or even mentioned among the disciplines that comprise American studies. Why is that the case? What constitutes American Studies? How does the American Studies field conceptualize America? Which scientific disciplines partake in and dominate this academic field and, more generally, the field of Area Studies? Why?

These are the questions that this paper attempts to elucidate. The research findings are based on the author's teaching and research geography experience in US academia in the 1990–2007 period. The paper offers some possible reasons and explanations for the relationship between the Geography and American Studies fields of study and attempts to fathom what it spells for the future of American Studies.

The Area: Similarities and Differences in Constituting the Object of Study

America is the object of study of both American Studies and Regional Geography. Regional Geography "divides" the Earth's surface in areas, called regions and classifies them, according to natural and/or cultural criteria. It views America as one such region – an area of "vertical" interaction between human societies and the natural environment. Geography also describes the unique place of America in the "horizontal" order, its position in relation to the other places on the surface of the Earth, its connections with them. Regional Geography, a Geography sub-field, studies regions of different scale – from the US through North America and Latin America to the Americas as in hemispheric studies.

"America" of the American Studies field is much more fluid and dynamic as an object of study. The field is certainly still centered on the study of the US and most of the work in it is still devoted to that country. In the words of one of the founders of this scholarly field, Henry Nash Smith, "By "American Studies" I shall mean "the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole" (in Maddox 1).

The Canadian Association for American Studies is one of the few organizations that, according to its journal, does not see a problem with equating "America" with the US in that respect (Canadian Review of American Studies). Other parts of the world, however, are not that "generous". But, as John Carlos Rowe observes, "today we understand "American Studies" to encompass the different societies of the Western Hemisphere, their many different languages, the global intersections we identify loosely with the "Pacific Rim" and "Atlantic World", and the history of Western imperialisms and neo-imperialisms that continue to shape global realities" (Rowe 2012: 21).

In Latin America, the fact that the US citizens call themselves “Americans” causes at least some discomfort for many, who see “the appropriation of the collective identity of all peoples and countries of the Western Hemisphere as a clear act of cultural imperialism.” For that reason, a Brazilian proposal suggests renaming the American Studies programs in the US universities to US Studies.” (Santos,1) Nevertheless, despite the ongoing debates about the imperializing implications of the term, however, American studies remains the dominant name for the study of the US in the US academy and abroad.

In recent years, however, American Studies has incorporated research on Canada and Latin America too. A transnational, even global perspective on America has become one of the leading currents in the field in the beginning of the twenty-first century. A question is even being asked about “Where, after all, do the borders of America stop...?” given its influence on the world economy and cultures (The Encyclopedia of American Studies). Rather than assuaging the debate about the geographic area – object of American Studies, this Americanization view strengthens the ‘US imperialism’ argument in parts of the world way beyond Latin America. (E.g., see Yoshimi 2005.)

Postmodernist and radical approaches also provide possible “solutions” to the apparent problem of geographic scope of the object of American Studies. Vernacular “America” is being constantly reinvented or re-discovered. It has different and quickly changing meaning for people in different parts of the world. Compare, for example, the “My America” – the freedom fighter and bearer of democracy and free market image, that was relatively widespread in Eastern Europe to “America – the New Japan” – as in the next imperialistic hegemon in the Pacific Rim states, to the “Satan” view that many in the Middle East share. The diversity of human perceptions and modes of representation prompts the international journal, *Ameriquets*, to define America as “some place in the Americas, an absolute, but an achievable, objective” or even as an unachievable one (Barsky).

Despite some differences, Geography of America and American Studies share the same objective and vernacular object of study – America. The ways they constitute and approach its “contents”, however, might explain the past relationship of the two disciplines or rather the lack of it and could also give some indication as to the future of American Studies.

Comparative Analysis of the Research Content or What Do American Studies and Geography “Fill the Box of America With”?

While History studies the time dimension, Geography examines the spatial relationships on the Earth’s surface. More precisely, Geography explores the contents of this space, what it is “filled with,” as well as the human perceptions and representations of it. Geography claims to be, in fact, the only discipline that investigates

both the natural and the human elements and processes that comprise any area of the globe, as well as their relations, organization and order. Geography of America, for example, researches the land, climate, people, political organizations, international relations and cultural traits, among many others, as well as the images they produce and communicate.

American Studies, on the other hand, are devoted almost exclusively to culture and history, according to the “oldest and largest” American Studies Association in the US. (<http://www.theasa.net/07.11.2007>) The online Encyclopedia of American Studies seems even more limiting in its portrayal of the field. It views American Studies as a vast range of disciplines, all of which are trying to describe just the cultures of the US. (<http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/index.html>, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) Landscape, economy, law, international influence or politics are all missing from this picture, as well as their spatial integration and differentiation aspects. Not surprisingly, geography is not mentioned among the many fields of inquiry, such as history, literature, religion, art and architecture, philosophy, music, science, folklore, ethnic studies, anthropology, material culture, museum studies, sociology, government, communications, education, library science, gender studies, and popular culture, to name a few. The American Studies Web is one of few outlets, which recognizes that the Nature and Environment topic is an intricate part of American Studies. It has found no place for geography, however, among the many social science and humanities topics listed. (<http://lamp.georgetown.edu/asw/> 09.11.2007)

One explanation of the “missing geography” issue could be found in the “only in America” degree of geographic illiteracy. A superfluous glance at the web site of the American Studies Association provides plenty of evidence in that respect. The Association seems to perceive and organize the American Studies “world” in seven regions. Two of them are defined according to cultural features: the Middle East (religion) and Latin America and the Caribbean (language). The rest – Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South Pacific – are outlined according to their physical geographic characteristics and roughly correspond to the permanently populated continents. Even if one ignores the different criteria used in the same classification, it seems pretty obvious that American Studies, a field that defines itself as studying social characteristics (culture, language, history) in a particular area, should not use physical regions to describe and understand its object of study.

An even more troubling example of the inconsistencies that result from the oblivion to geography is the apparent attempt to understand the human and social characteristics of a place (its literature and history), without knowledge of its physical features. The disregard to the study of American nature, the snubbing of the specifics of the physical landscapes and their relations to society deprives the field of a crucially important means of explanation of the human and social

phenomena they study. Dialects, for example, can be neither understood, nor explained, without knowledge of the particularities of the physical geography of the place. Neither can US history be even imagined without constantly referring to its geography.

The Interdisciplinary Approach

Another interesting paradox presents itself in the American Studies field through the advocacy for a multidisciplinary, but, especially, an interdisciplinary approach. The US American Studies Association is again a prominent example here. (<http://www.theasa.net>, 09.11.2007) It claims to approach American culture from many directions but with the desire to view America as a whole rather than from the perspective of a single discipline. This is exactly what Geography offers. Or, as Danova states, “There are brave attempts to model American Studies on a plurality of voices and perspectives which do not fit within existing definitions of academic disciplines” (92).

The interdisciplinary nature of American Studies can never be realized, if the physical realm, among others, remains invisible. Geography, on the other hand, studies comprehensively all natural and cultural characteristics as they co-exist, interrelate, influence and depend on each other in a particular area to form regions or geosystems. The US and America have long been recognized as regions of different geographic scale and Regional Geography, through its spatial approach, has been integrating knowledge from diverse fields throughout its long existence.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss the relationship between the disciplines Regional Geography and American Studies, or rather, their close to nonexistent relationship. However, the absence of geography is not exclusive to American Studies only. A similar situation exists in the Bulgarian Studies and the Balkanistics fields too. Geographic education certainly has to take some of the blame for this. Nevertheless, it looks quite inefficient to “rediscover America.” There are hardly any good excuses for ignoring past knowledge. Instead, it is of crucial importance that the American Studies field, as well as any Area Studies field, to use the scientific insights, methodological experience and approaches of Geography.

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