

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Since September 11, 2001, the United States has assumed an even more dominant place upon the world stage than it did before, consolidating its position as the only superpower since the fall of the Soviet Union. These circumstances show once again how important it is to have a better understanding of the history and cultural traditions of the United States. This central importance is not, however, adequately reflected in the status or role of American Studies in Australia. I do not presume in these remarks based on nearly thirty years' experience to speak for New Zealand, so adequately handled in Maureen Montgomery's separate contribution, though there are clearly many parallels and shared organizational concerns relevant to ANZASA.

It would be a cliché to claim that American Studies in Australia is in a state of crisis. Indeed it would be hard to know what might constitute such a crisis, since there have been many positive achievements. Yet both disciplinary changes and the institutional context of Australian higher education make American Studies marginal and vulnerable to decline. This, ironically, at a time when its research strengths are strongly recognised on the international stage.

Certainly if American Studies is aboard a sinking ship, a leaking boat, or an ocean liner looking out for icebergs, it is a vessel in which there are many other passengers than Americanists alone. American Studies in Australia must be set within the larger picture of Australian higher education funding. This bigger picture is partly to blame for the malaise in American Studies.

American Studies has been disadvantaged along with the decline in general funding for the humanities. In case anyone hasn't noticed, the general university environment in Australia has undergone rapid change to reduced federal funding, to 'user pays' concepts through HECS and full fee-paying students, and to vocationalism. These changes are having especially severe consequences for postgraduate studies. The introduction of new funding guidelines in which most of the money that universities receive for supervising postgraduate research comes in a payment upon completion, together with the broader shift towards earning income from research make for an extremely difficult research outlook for American studies in the longer term. Funding for research and for the hiring of new university teachers is now increasingly dependent on private endowments or on student enrolments. The latter are becoming oriented towards vocational

studies, while the private groups active in the humanities that I encountered in my term as Head of a largish history department from 1999 through 2001 tended to favour funding specific ethnic studies of groups heavily represented in Australia, or nations which want to have their profile boosted. Most of these are in Asian or European Studies.

The situation for American Studies is worse than in some other areas. This is because there is little evidence that American Studies is a priority for funding in most or indeed any of our universities. As a result, the previously healthy state of American Studies is at risk. The most obvious example concerns American studies programs cut out at Monash University; but American Studies has also suffered as 'collateral damage' from the decline in history departments around the country, with some departments slashed to about a third of their former size of two decades ago. In addition, the Australian Centre for American Studies at the University of Sydney closed when its funding from the university was withdrawn, leaving the absence of any National Centre for American Studies as a glaring example of the low esteem in which our political masters in Canberra and our university masters hold our work. Meanwhile, for example, we see chairs established in such fields as Irish studies. That this small country appears to be more important to the thinking of our fund-raisers than the world's greatest economic and political power speaks volumes for the marginalisation of American Studies in the higher education sector.

One might think that the world's greatest and most powerful country might be able to give significant support to American Studies at university level either directly or indirectly. If it did so it would be matching the efforts of the Taiwanese, Korean, Portuguese and other governments dangling money for studies centres in front of the University of New South Wales, to take one example. But US funding is mostly not available except through the Fulbright program; most US government programs and private foundations tie funding to American residence or citizenship. Meanwhile the Australian-American Fulbright scheme has become preoccupied with business and practical disciplines; it has embraced the same market-oriented and narrowly utilitarian approach seen in the priorities of our funding masters in Canberra, DEETYA (now Department of Education, Science and Training or DEST) over the last decade. Those policies in research stress industry-university links and applied research.

The impacts of this funding position upon ANZASA flow from the impacts upon American Studies: Notably, the lack of or difficulty of obtaining replacements, let alone new positions to expand programs to take account of increased student demand, or the increased importance of the United

States in the world. ANZASA's membership is threatened by this situation. As was made clear at the Geelong conference session on the future of American Studies in Australia and New Zealand, postgraduate membership has been healthy, but members of long standing are retiring or soon to retire. The next few years will be crucial for the future of American Studies in Australia.

Here the budget restraints on higher education become especially important. It is all too easy for administrations to cut faculty simply through attrition. This would be strategically unwise for Australia (and New Zealand) and we should tell administrators so—and why. Not only is the United States more important than ever in international affairs. Student demand for courses in American and American-related subjects is strong in many universities. We should share this important information so as to make the case for American Studies as a vital and sought after field.

A deeper problem is the future not of the Association but of postgraduate teaching and research. Funding of postgraduates is inadequate across all fields in the humanities, and in the case of American Studies is exacerbated by the lower level of the Australian dollar. From \$1.30 in 1970 the Australian dollar slipped last year to 48 cents. Though it has since recovered to 60 cents, the long-term trend has been definitely down. This affects all types of research on the US at all levels, but it affects postgraduates more severely.

Meanwhile sources of funding for Australian and New Zealand postgraduates to go to graduate school in the US have also dried up. The favourable situation of thirty years ago that was backed by the high value of the Australian dollar no longer applies. For the postgraduate student who wished to do serious archival work in the US a generation ago, US scholarships and travel money were somewhat easier to obtain. Partly this was due to the fortuitous case of the Duke University Commonwealth Fellowships; but also to the Fulbright scheme. The earmarked Commonwealth Duke fellowships no longer exist and the Fulbright is, as I have already indicated, directed more toward business, law and other 'practical' disciplines.

But there is a disparateness in American Studies that goes beyond funding. This brings us to the second problem—the boundaries of the field. The rise of globalisation, and the overwhelming preponderance of American power ironically threaten to weaken interest in specialist US studies. We talk now of globalisation rather than Americanisation. International Studies programs are popular, and will no doubt be reflected in future scholarship.

Much of what these new globalists do, however, must give attention to American power and culture and its global reach.

But the problem of disciplinary boundaries predates the emergence of the 'one superpower' model and the vogue of globalisation, which is really only ten years old. For more than two decades, many of the people who have commented in the media on the United States's foreign policy, for example, have not been members of ANZASA. Today, their links are with strategic studies, defence policy analysis, and so on. Nor is the teaching of American studies in Australia reflected fully in ANZASA. One noticeable trend is that many people do study and teach American topics, for example in film, drama, and cultural studies, but are not currently and in some case never have been members of the Association. Our Association has been strong in history and literature, but has not reached out effectively to include representatives of new media and cultural studies, as well as to established fields such as law and politics where American topics have long been done. The impact of cultural studies, especially, drew support away from American Studies. Formed to combat specialisation in the first place, American Studies has itself been a victim of sub-disciplinary specialisation.

Of course the objective picture is not so bad today, and the record has been good. Rather, I am thinking about the trajectory. The record of research and publication that our colleagues have attained shows the inherited strength of our intellectual capital. American Studies is highly valued by American colleagues in one of the most competitive academic fields there is, and is influential to some degree within American Studies in the United States. There are also signs of strong academic recognition within Australia. Thus a group of researchers at the University of Sydney headed by Shane White has won a larger ARC grant for an in-depth study of Harlem, one of the largest grants ever given in the Humanities. This is an index of the kind of the regard with which our researchers are held internationally and in Australia.

Strengths in teaching also can be found. Classes are substantial. I have no figures for other universities but in UNSW the numbers have been rising for several years. Student interest does still reflect to some degree students' instinctive belief in American exceptionalism as David Goodman indicates in his piece in this issue. Yet the rise of American history and literature embedded in comparative courses indicates a broader and more sophisticated view in line with globalisation and transnational perspectives. As teachers and scholars, we need to appeal to these new interests and new areas while retaining our reference point of the United States. There have been areas of progress in teaching since the 1970s; the content of American components in many diverse courses in Australian history departments has

increased. The rise of film, media and communications, and popular culture degrees and courses, for example, have brought in new American materials, but the practitioners who teach courses in these fields do not recognise themselves as what they often are—practitioners in American Studies. They often deal in concepts such as modernity, all very relevant, but not limited to US history's traditional subject matter. A glance at Noeline Milson's survey 'American Studies in Australia' *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 18 (Dec. 1999) verifies how broad the concept of 'the American' is.

What can the Association do? For one thing, the areas of ancillary growth need to be attended to, to ensure that those who in fact know little about the U.S. context of these topics do not dominate these fields, and to make sure that the insights of these new fields are incorporated for our intellectual benefit. For the Association, getting in members from other disciplines that have so far not been well represented could be a higher priority; this might also include or extend to the encouragement of high school teachers to join the association by links to their state HTA web sites. There is a need to develop ties also with the leading professional associations, for example the Australian Historical Association. We could seek some form of affiliate membership or consider coordinating future conferences with theirs.

A second idea would involve the encouragement of multilateral exchanges of scholars and students in American Studies programs around the world. Non-American historians who write on the US interact with their American colleagues, but not with each other across national boundaries. There are partial exceptions in the European Association for American Studies, and in the trans-Tasman cooperation in the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association. A number of Canadian scholars (e.g. Michael Fellman and the late Robert Cuff) and at least one prominent European practitioner (Rob Kroes) have also participated in the work of ANZASA conferences, as well as others from Asia; but there the exceptions seem to end. Foundation support is needed for creating and sustaining better contacts between non-American practitioners. One way of proceeding would be to try to develop web links with the European American studies and British American Studies Associations, and to try to encourage visiting scholars to come to take part in the 2004 and 2006 conferences. Perhaps holding a mini-conference in conjunction with the 2005 CISH (International Congress of Historical Sciences) congress in Sydney could raise the Association's visibility, as some European Americanists are planning to attend.

There is little that can be done to alter the basic structures of higher education within which we work. But we in American studies could

develop pilot programs to try to do better things with the limited resources available. Attention might be given to the pooling of resources to make a more concentrated effort in postgraduate teaching and research. If postgraduate education is to survive I believe it must do so on a cooperative basis between institutions. Australia may not in the future be able to afford to have graduate students in American Studies at so many institutions.

At the level of university policy, it might be an idea to try to develop something like the French system in which a national graduate faculty might be established throughout Australia, with academics attached to different universities that are linked together as an Australian graduate school. All of the leading researchers would be elected to it or selected by an administering institution on an interdisciplinary basis. Student load and especially supervision would be reallocated within this system. Dual supervision could be encouraged. For example a student based in Melbourne would be jointly supervised by academics in both Melbourne and say Canberra. EFTSU or equivalent load could be transferred.

This may be pie in the sky, but it is about time that such ideas are debated. All in all, the researchers and teachers in American Studies around Australia amount to less than the history faculty of some of the large US state universities. Together we have strength, and we should seek to promote that strength by cooperative action through our Association.