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American Studies as a Contemporary Disciplinary Practice

Abstract

The departure point of this article is that however one conceives the practice of American Studies one has to recognize that it is a disciplinary practice. In accordance with this contention the author proceeds to discuss the notion of the discipline as such before he goes on to ask and answer the question: “How do American Studies constitute themselves?” The author argues that American Studies, like other disciplines, constituted itself by objectifying an exceptional polity. The crux of his argument is that this self-constitution was founded on an act of erasure, whereby the evidence of capitalism was elided from the research agenda of the discipline. Contending that this erasure is paradoxical considering that American Studies has as its object the exemplary capitalist nation, the author proceeds to delineate the reasons for this erasure. He goes on to contend that American Studies was complicit with the capitalist system of production and that one can speak of it as being a part of an ideological apparatus. However, he proceeds by showing that the discipline of American Studies has always had to address the evidence of its object, namely the historical transformations in the United States, which have forced the discipline, at different points of the historical continuum, to revise its protocols and research agenda. In the last part of the article the author maintains that the unfolding economic crisis sets the ground for one such transformation and that the “command of money,” which has been revealed by the crisis, beckons us to undertake a new interdisciplinary networking, this time with economics. In the conclusion of the paper the author argues that the challenges of the present moment force the discipline to attend to postdisciplinary developments which have been proposed as ways with which to address the intractability of the present mutation of capitalism. At the very end of the article the author

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articulates and identifies the political position which is implied in his reading of American Studies as a disciplinary practice.

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> *The gradients, the gauges are continuous. Fields of study, like spectral bands, differ only in wavelength. No discrete moment when red ends and orange begins. … The field is rife with refugees, immigrants from sister disciplines and distant relations. Powers 88-9*

A relatively late newcomer onto the academic scene and yet in different ways the progenitor of the medley of "studies"[1] that we see proliferating in different institutional settings, American Studies has produced an archive of self-reflections that is too numerous to even cursorily set down. A recurrent motif of these soundings of what exactly is the practice of American Studies is their problematic disciplinary status. Regarding this disciplinary instability, one can say, mindful of the different settings in which American Studies is conducted, that sometimes its openness, its almost "anything goes" nature, has been detrimental to the recognition and institutionalization of the discipline whereas at other times and locations it has been argued to be exactly the opposite. As a rule, pronouncements on the practice of American Studies have been dependent on contemporaneous developments, whether these be understood as relating to the academic setting or the conditions within the polity where American Studies is being practiced. The latter geographical qualification needs to be kept in mind because American Studies, more than any other similar scholarly field, has not confined itself to the country targeted as its object of study, but has morphed into a much more global phenomenon not only in respect to its agenda but also in view of practitioners that define their teaching and research by the markers of the field. Furthermore, these two sites – the American and the global – are not independent of each other but interdependent. That interdependent transaction is skewed. Namely, the work of American Studies done outside the United States hardly registers within the discipline, while we who are doing American Studies abroad have to keep abreast of events and developments both within the object of our studies – the United States itself – and in the discipline as practiced there![2]

My take on American Studies comes from an academic setting which, comparatively speaking, is informed, more than others, by a tradition of the discipline;[3] but which again, unlike others,

exemplifies a lack of institutional recognition. To address that lack, to imagine a place for American Studies in the local academic setting, but also to reflect on the field itself, I believe that we have to know how our field of study was constituted, why it emerged at a particular historical juncture and how it ought to address the transformations going on not only within the field itself but also within the object of our research. It is only in such a manner that we can legitimate our own scholarly pursuit and perhaps make a contribution to it. Having observed what people are doing when they think they are doing American Studies, I am more and more convinced that we have to pause and think what is it that we do when we are doing American Studies. To answer that question in a negative way, I take as my departure point that we are not practicing American Studies when we research, teach or write upon this or that aspect of the United States polity![4]

Taking cognizance of the various, oftentimes conflicting conceptualizations of American Studies (an older recapitulation was formulated by Gene Wise (1979), while a succinct updating has been provided by Simon J. Bronner in the Encyclopedia of American Studies), I will proceed under the assumption that if either positively defined or defined by default – as postdiscipline, antidiscipline – American Studies is a disciplinary practice. This is especially true if we argue for it in front of our students or of our administrative boards. But, unlike less localized and more archivist disciplinary fields, this practice takes cognizance of the circumstances in which it is conducted and keeps track of developments in its object of study, that is, is attuned to what is happening in the United States at large and within the discipline as practiced there. Let me illustrate the latter two considerations by referring to Grant Farred who, in his discussion of discipline, explicitly mentions American Studies. In an aside in his philosophically-informed discussion of disciplines, to which I will return shortly, Farred sketches the situation at American universities where scholarship is increasingly, as he writes, “subject to the politics of scarcity” where programs, amidst the uncontrollable logic of marketization, can be “curtailed, abolished, or absorbed.” As an example he mentions American Studies programs “which will incorporate Latino/a studies, Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and African American studies” (71). The site-specificity of these complaints is obvious to American Studies people outside the United States because the “studies” that Farred mentions as being endangered by the “subsumption under a single rubric” are always already constitutive elements of American Studies programs. In these circumstances, the strategic political work needed to justify

these programs has to challenge not the "amorphousness" of interdisciplinarity but rather what I call the pathos of disciplines.[5] Whether the promotion of interdisciplinarity in American Studies prepares the grave for the existing discipline-based university system and is thereby an accomplice in the Americanization of education signalizes a threat that need not be minimized. I merely contend that American Studies, and here I again reiterate that I write under the possibilities and constraints of a local position, offers a privileged site to address not only that threat and that complicity but also the way site-specificity marks pedagogical practice. However we proceed to do this, I hold that the preliminary step is to think what we are doing when we are doing a discipline and how that thinking reflects upon our practice both as it has been implemented in the past and how it is to meet present challenges.

Grant Farred's reading of interdisciplinarity makes us pause and ask what is at stake when we are, for example, supposedly doing American Studies. His claim that "there must, a priori, be interdisciplinarity because the discipline is the surest mark of 'erased' knowledge" makes us query the orthodox view that legitimates American Studies on account of their interdisciplinary breadth. Farred's claim that there can be no discipline "without the deliberate erasing, of that which apprehends, challenges, or 'frames' the discipline" (60) beckons us to reengage this self-appraisal. Namely, since American Studies, with its archive, its methodologies and research agendas always already stakes out a field, it inevitably works, as Farred writes, "only under the condition of erasure" (60). Such an extrapolation is warranted by the Heideggerian context within which Farred thinks disciplinarity. Of course, the German philosopher was not alone in contending that all science – and here I subsume American Studies under the broad meaning of the word – "objectifies," makes a theme (or object) of research. A thoughtful account of scientific knowledge has to pay close heed to his pronouncements on how theory secures a region of the real as its object-area and how it in advance maps out the possibilities for the very possibility of posing questions. Needless to say, this can be stated in simpler terms. Norbert Häring and Niall Douglas head the introduction to their book Economists and the Powerful (2012), to which I will return in the closing section of my paper, with Einstein's words: "Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use." The demarcation of an object-area does not only dictate what is seen, determines not only the possibilities of posing questions but, I would add, also implicates the methods disciplines use in

attempting to answer them. Thusly the Croatian philosopher Branko Despot writes that the "scientific method is not something external to science or its object. The method, methodically transparent and scientifically implemented, is the self-constitution of the scientificity of science and the objectness of the object" (43). To recapitulate: before the scholarly endeavor can commence, one has to have a horizon within which the object of its work and its methodology is constituted. To generalize, as a discipline, American Studies postulated a stable object of theoretical reflection, created it and deployed a methodological apparatus that was appropriate for its articulation. Like any other discipline, to constitute itself American Studies had to abstract from the manifold of its object, to simplify it, to leave out certain of its aspects. This disciplinary maneuver was remarked upon by Foucault, who recognized the epistemological issues which attend the way objects of knowledge are constituted in scientific practice. In Foucault's words, every scientific discipline has to discover a way of "limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object – and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable" (41). How did American Studies delimit its domain?

If they are a scientific pursuit, American Studies could not embrace the totality of their object. On the contrary, they have fielded paradigms without which, if we remember Kuhn's observation, a discipline cannot exist. Put otherwise, American Studies was not merely "looking around" (Kuhn 96), but scholars within these paradigms were seeking out things they expected to see. Without much ado, I hold that the dominant and underlying paradigm of American Studies, one which was initially substantiated by scholars within the field and the one which was afterwards, in different ways, negotiated by later practitioners, is the notion of American exceptionalism. Hans R. Guggisberg explores the concept and situates it in the historical setting of the victorious outcome of American engagement in World War II. The underlying assumption of the concept is simple: "America had always been fundamentally different from Europe … any variations among localities, regions, and ethnic groups within the United States were generally less important than the similarities that constituted American culture and made it different from that of Europe" (in Glaser and Wellenreuther 273). Donald Pease, the foremost critic of the idea of American exceptionalism, describes the concept as meaning "that America is 'distinctive' (meaning merely different), or 'unique' (meaning anomalous), or 'exemplary' (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that

it is 'exempt' from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an 'exception' to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)" (9).

The notion of exceptionalism permeated the methodological holism of the discipline which as time passed, according to Cecil F. Tate, was transformed into an "ontological holism" that demanded "that the subject itself (the culture) be in reality a whole" (130). It need be said that it was precisely this holistic whole which was questioned by later New Americanists who started asking whose America was projected in the founding texts of American Studies and who gave voice to collectivities that had been silenced in earlier readings. Whether we agree or not with William V. Spanos's contention that it was the Vietnam War which, according to him, "disclosed the violent contradictions" of the United States polity, one is hard put to deny that the period "instigated the e-mergence of a multiplicity of historical subject positions (contradictory Others) hitherto repressed or marginalized by a larger and dominant cultural identity: 'America'" (170). However, the reinscription of race, ethnicity and gender into the object of American Studies did not do away with the concept of exceptionalism. One could even say that the supposed ability of the polity to reintegrate the excluded margin – embodied in the idea of multiculturalism – gave it fresh life. Donald Pease maintains that throughout the Cold War "American exceptionalism supplied a prerequisite horizon of intelligibility for the understanding of American events" (7). Pinpointing America's "disavowal of its imperial history," Pease notes how the notion of exceptionalism represented the United States as "uniquely positioned," differentiating it from the imperialist ambitions of the Soviet Union. Exceptionalist discourse legitimated America's dominance within a dichotomized world. The United States was sustained through its self-representations "as an exception to the rules through which it regulated the rest of the global order" (19-20). Proposing a new agenda for American Studies after the dismemberment of the bipolar world, Pease argues that the globalized world has revealed the need to understand "US's embeddedness within transnational and transcultural forces rather than reaffirmations of its unique isolation from them" (209). Thusly, both the research that has addressed what Bernard-Henri Lévy has called America's "vertigo of identity" (238) and the work that has followed up on Pease's call to explore American geo-political "embeddedness" have taken issue with American exceptionalism. However, the tenacity of the concept is not only evident in the fact that these revisionist readings have to take it as their point of departure but also in the way it

continues to be a factor in American politics and society![6] The crux of my argument is that reappraisals of the discipline of American Studies that sought to redress the erasures that attended its self-constitution and the later broadening of its agenda during the so-called transnational turn have continued to perpetuate a blind spot that more than any other subverts its exceptionalist status. To put it bluntly, that blind spot is capitalism.[7]

Perusing the literature of American Studies, the reader would be hard put to recognize that the object of the discipline, the United States, has for some time been and is emphatically so at the present moment the exemplary polity of capitalism. To account for this we need again to recall the logic of disciplinary self-constitution, whereby the discipline lets certain things be seen while others are marginalized or entirely passed over. In this sense, the founders of the discipline were candid about what they were doing in putting forth their conceptualizations of the essentials of American experience. To recognize this, all one has to do is go to the prefaces to the canonical texts of the discipline. Each of them starts with a description of the methodological assumptions underlying their interpretations. Thusly, due heed ought to be paid to a bracketed aside Perry Miller makes after stating that it was “obvious” to him that he had “to commence with the Puritan migration” “to begin at the beginning” in articulating his “vision.” The aside reads: “I recognize, and herein pay my tribute to, the priority of Virginia; but what I wanted was a coherence with which I could coherently begin” (viii). Needless to say, Jamestown in Virginia was not only prior to Plymouth but, more pertinent to my argument, it was blatantly a commercial enterprise![8] A perusal of subsequent works, which supplemented Miller’s “errand into the wilderness” and “the American jeremiad” with myths, paradigms or symbols such as “the American Adam” (Lewis 1959), “virgin land” (Nash Smith 1950) or “machine in the garden” would show that capitalism is the absent presence of their interpretations. Amongst the scholars of the “myth and symbol” school it was Alan Trachtenberg who in The Incorporation of America (1982) foregrounded capitalism, the power of the corporation, as the force which both spatially unified the American continent and in doing so produced a distinct social order. It is indicative that his study has not been given the hearing I think it deserves in later interventions and rereading of the archive of American Studies![9]

Although, as shown, American Studies did question the holistic vision promulgated by the exceptionalist logic, it did so in a manner that continued to keep capitalism in abeyance. The

articulation of experiences that had been silenced in the earlier exceptionalist vision did not unequivocally name capital as the structuring core of the American polity. Focused as they were on race, gender and ethnicity, the revisionists privileged issues of identity over those of political economy. Although in his introduction to the 1991 collection The New American Studies Philip Fisher at one point states that American society is "an economy rather than a culture" (xvi), he emphasizes that the focus of interest of the authors he is presenting is on rhetorics, that is "the action potential of language and images, not just their power or contrivance to move an audience but also the location of words, formulas, images, and ideological units of meaning within politics" (vii). Furthermore, one would have expected that an anthology of texts, the majority of which were published after the heyday of the 1990s "new economy," after the collapse of Enron and the bursting of the dot.com bubble, would have recognized the centrality of capital in the present United States and the way banks and the ascendency of finance have transformed the object of American Studies. However, we search in vain through the book for an account of processes that culminated in the outbreak of the crisis in 2008. True to say, the editors do note the "new, transnational forms of capitalism," the increasing "integration" of the world's economy, the augmented "flow of people, commodities and information," but they contend that in respect to American Studies this has produced "an increased tendency to reexamine the very concept of American nationalism." In their opinion: "Questions about borders and borderlands, about empire and neocolonialism, about migrations of all sorts, and the hybrid histories and subjects they have produced have moved to center stage in the field" (Radway et al. 3-4). To this list I will add John Carlos Rowe's latest publication The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies (2012) in digital format, a format which, according to the author, makes the book an act of cultural politics which does not compete "with other acts of political activism," but nevertheless makes it a "part of the work for greater social justice" (26).[10] In his introduction Rowe contours the economic crisis and summarily describes how the investment banking firm of Bear Stearns went bankrupt in a matter of weeks (17-18). Nevertheless, when one turns to the body of the text, it becomes evident that Rowe chooses to target other issues in his "political critique" which, as he writes, is impossible without the interpretation of the "cultural matrix." As he stipulates: "analysis remains mere commentary on political particulars until it has taken into account how political practices rely on the rhetorical persuasion of culture" (20).[11] Although issues tackled in all of these books are of paramount

importance and, I would add, evince the mediating impact of capital on all segments of reality, I think that what is needed is a more concerted effort to think capital itself. Before we do so, we have to name[12] it as the structuring core of the object that we are investigating. In doing so we will have to retrieve not only the thematic of capitalism but also a certain theoretical position and, loosening disciplinary constraints, ask the reasons for its absence in the disciplinary agenda and think through the implications of its incorporation into the field.

There are both general and specific reasons for the absence of capitalism in American Studies. Regarding the first, I cite Hernando De Soto's observation from his appropriately titled book The Mystery of Capital: "The paradox is as clear as it is unsettling: Capital, the most essential component of Western economic advance, is the one that has received the least attention. Neglect has shrouded it in mystery" (10-11). That paradox is of course even more pronounced when we are dealing with the most economically advanced country in the West. I have elsewhere written about how dominant theoretical preoccupations, particularly the so-called "cultural turn" or the protocols of poststructuralism, have deprioritized the economy, thusly the question of capital, in dominant research agendas (Grgas 2011). Since these notes are being written amidst a state of crisis which, I believe, imposes an urgency upon the discipline, I note an observation made by Murray E.G. Smith:

> *Postmodernists assured us throughout most of the 1980s that the "new reality" was one in which the production of knowledge, fashions, simulacra, tastes, and even identities would count for far more than the production of Marx's "value" and the crises this bred; and they added that it was only upon this essentially cultural terrain that conflicting visions of the future could be fought out. (234)*

Closer to the disciplinary framework of these notes, we must supplement these observations by asking if there were any endogenous reasons why the discipline itself abstracted from the capitalist reality of its object. In an indirect fashion, Michael Denning's discussion of the "anomalous" position of Marxism within the discipline (Denning 1986) provides an answer and enables us to extrapolate from its argument. Doing so, we can say that the fact that Marxism and its critique of capitalism was considered to be mere Soviet ideology clearly led to the conclusion that both its analysis and the terms it relies upon in exploring human society could not be accommodated into a field of

knowledge that was engaged in articulating an antipodal, exceptionalist identity. If American Studies projected the United States as the exceptional nation, a nation different from and transcending the laws of history which Marx had revealed to be determined by the power of capital, it was logical that the discipline turned a blind eye to how those were being played out within the domain of its own object.

Whatever explanation we opt for in accounting for the absence of capital in American Studies, we will do so keeping in mind the strategic positioning of our object of study and its present hegemony. However we proceed, we will register its exceptionality, but now with the caveat that it is exceptional in a way that has not been properly registered in American Studies. Perry Anderson's comment on this is relevant to my later observations:

> *A large literature has been spent on the American exception. But the only exceptionality that really matters – since all nations are in their way sui generis – is the configuration that has founded its global hegemony. How is this best expressed? It lies in the virtually perfect fit the country offers between optimal geographical and optimal social conditions for capitalist development. That is: a continental scale of territory, resources and market, protected by two oceans that no other nation-state comes near to possessing; and a settler-immigrant population forming a society with virtually no pre-capitalist past, apart from its local inhabitants, slaves and religious creeds, and bound only by the abstractions of a democratic ideology. Here are to be found all the requirements for spectacular economic growth, military power and cultural penetration. (Anderson 2002)*

A scholarly project whose very raison d'état was motivated by identity politics could not accommodate the story of capital. I have in mind that version of the story which recognizes capital's annihilating power, a power which demolishes all closed forms, which destroys all self-contained local or national identities. To focus on the deidentificatory dynamic of capital goes against the grain of projects that are primarily engaged in identitarian politics.[13] I will return to the contradiction implicit in these two movements in my conclusion. I add here that the rejection of Marxism can be seen as a tactical maneuver whereby the discipline refused to envisage its object in the discursive position in which it had been interpellated by its ideological adversaries. On another level, American Studies can be said to have systematically sought to hide the enabling conditions of the exceptionalist nature of its object.

Anderson's "optimal social conditions" were neither engaged nor impaired by American Studies. On the contrary, the paradigms of American Studies celebrated the encroachment on the American continent and sought to resolve the contradictions arising amidst the process of industrialization (Marx 1964). One could contend that they even postulated a temporality that is complicit with the capitalist process of production. Namely, as Paul Connerton has argued, the capitalist process of production is constituted by the loss of the memory of the very process through which it is produced. In his study How Modernity Forgets (2009) Connerton contends that the ensemble of the labor process, of consumption, career structures and the media "all precipitate a cascade of reciprocally reinforcing repercussions the overall effect of which is to install systemic forgetting into the structure of modernity itself" (88). If the United States can be said to be, using Connerton's formulation, the exemplary nation of modernity, "or at least that component of it represented by the economic expansion of the capitalist process of production," it "produces cultural amnesia not by accident but intrinsically and necessarily. Forgetting is built into the capitalist process of production itself, incorporated in the bodily experience of its life-spaces" (125). Reading this, we can return to R.W.B. Lewis's "principle of the sovereign present" (16) in his book The American Adam (1955) and ask whether his reading of a distinct American temporality has deeper implications than we would on a superficial reading assign it. On the background of Connerton's observations, it is possible to assess Lewis's paradigm as having a profound ideological function in promulgating the "systemic forgetting" endemic to the capitalist process of production.

Following up on this, if American Studies is viewed as a "mnemonic regime," to borrow a term from Tatjana Jukić (2011), which tactically and therefore politically allows the work of memory to be enacted, choosing this or that parcel from the warehouse of historical evidence, then they come dangerously close to being an ideology. As such, that regime determines what is to be incorporated into the archive of the discipline, what is to be emphasized, how is the thusly-recuperated past to be used and narrativized and, of course, what is to be left out, obliterated. Recapitulating what has been said so far, the discipline has not only deemphasized capital in representing the United States but was in a certain sense complicit with capital's structuring of both space and time. However, since the object of American Studies is not an ethereal thing, but rather a social entity, the reality and the actuality of the latter has intermittently intervened into the

discursive field of the discipline, challenged what the discipline has defined as its objects and subverted the attendant methodologies. In other words, American Studies has to address the evidence of its object, the historically evolving United States, which at certain points of its continuum has been racked by convulsions that could not be explained by the prevailing disciplinary orthodoxies. One such moment occurred in the 1960s when the "spectral margin," to quote Farred again, returned to haunt the discipline in the form of those who had been occluded from earlier accounts. I believe that today we are witnessing one such convulsion with the difference that the specter which haunts the discipline now is not localized in the United States, but stalks the global stage. Its name is capital.

It would be a futile chore to register the proliferating literature on capital, money or finance that has been spawned by the outbreak of the present crisis. On the present occasion I will restrict myself to a few observations made by Richard Dienst in his book The Bonds of Debt (2011). At the beginning of the book he writes of a "new kind of command, a monopoly of actuality, exercised on the one hand through the power of teletechnology to shape the world in its own image, and on the other by the power of money to decide what deserves to exist" (2). Dienst contends that nowadays "the main historical plot is written in the prolific and obscure scripts of capital" (3) and that in moments like these the most "fateful world-historical figures" are "central bankers, fund managers, insurance managers, insurance brokers, and the legions of traders and fixers swarming behind them" (3). If, as Nan Enstad contends, it is a "time honored tradition" in American Studies to shift "the object and disciplinary mix … to respond effectively to current states of emergency" (qtd. in Castronovo and Gillman 64), I am proposing that the crisis we are witness to demands that the object of our research become Dienst's "new command" and the institutions and figures that constitute it. The central role that finance, banks, money, and debt play in the present conjuncture demands that the disciplinary "mix" be re-stirred and that, amongst other things, economics take its place within the discipline of American Studies.[14] I will permit myself one more reference to Grant Farred:

Because the discipline is always insufficient, it is only through the (endless) proliferation of interdisciplinarity that erasure can, as it were, be "erased." The eradication of erasure is, of course, an impossible project, one that can be envisioned only by thinking against disciplinary foreclosure;

it is only the "strengthening," the infinite thinking, of thought, that can stand against foreclosure. (60)

As far as the erasure of capital in American Studies is concerned, it is obvious that in order to presence it, the proliferation of interdisciplinarity needs to engage the field of economics but, I will add, in a way that thinks against the foreclosure of economics itself.

In a certain sense this is a propitious moment for the networking of economics into the interdisciplinary research project. On the one hand there exists a consensus that we are living through an economic crisis, while on the other we bear daily witness to contradictory appraisals of its causes, to its nature and to possible outcomes. In a certain sense the economic crisis is coupled and compounded by an epistemological crisis within the field of economics itself. Intricate models that were used to explain and run the economy previous to the crisis have proven inadequate to the challenge of the latest mutation of capitalism. The formulas and the math that contributed to the exuberance of the so-called "new economy" have turned out to be just that, formulas that worked with an imagined world that abstracted from the reality of crisis. István Mészáros quotes an observation Keynes made in 1936 which has a bearing on the present: "Too large a proportion of recent 'mathematical' economics are mere concoctions, as imprecise as the initial assumption they rest on, which allow the author to lose sight of the complexities and interdependencies of the real world in a maze of pretentious and unhelpful symptoms" (Mészáros 80). Such a critique opens up a strategic point for cross-disciplinary dialogue particularly to a discipline that has always taken pride in addressing the complexities and interdependencies, the totality of the American world.

Such a dialogue ought to be encouraged by developments in "post-autistic economics" that have shown how money, the pivot point of dominant accounts of the crisis, is strangely missing as a topic in the study of economics![15] Furthermore, we ought to find encouragement for opening American Studies to economics when we come upon an economist proposing a radical overhaul of economics education that would, amongst other areas, incorporate World Literature into its curriculum (Reardon). Readers of contemporary American fiction will find nothing surprising or far-fetched in Reardon's proposal. In accord with their previous engagement with literature, American Studies will give a hearing to the testimony of American writers from the likes of Po Bronson,

DeLillo, Foster Wallace posthumous testament The Pale King (2011) to, for example, Dave Eggers's 2012 novel A Hologram for the King.[16] These are just some of the names which have heeded Michel Beaud's contention that "one cannot understand the contemporary period without analyzing the profound upheavals which the development of capitalism has brought about in societies throughout the world" (1). In attempting to fathom these upheavals, the work of these writers has proven symptomatic of a broader engagement with capitalism.[17] It seems that once again American writers have given reliable soundings of the tectonic shifts the nation is going through. If, going by this evidence, the present moment uncovers the way capitalism has networked the world, American Studies needs to posit the object of its research into the center of the said upheavals because, as William N. Parker long ago observed, it is in the United States that "the tendencies of Western capitalism could find fullest and most uncontrolled expression" (qtd. in Weinberg). If up to this point I have argued for the need to inscribe that "fullest and uncontrolled expression" into American Studies, in what remains I will remark upon the hegemonic position of the object of our discipline in the global order.

I begin by noting that the power of the United States affects the very discipline of economics. Whilst arguing for the re-inscription of the issue of power into economic analysis, Norbert Häring and Niall Douglas note that "economics has been molded typically to benefit the wealthy and the elite of the United States" (ix). According to their findings, the United States as the leading global power had decisive influence on the development of modern economic doctrine to the extent that that it has promoted "international statistical standards for measuring economic success that conform to the ideological underpinnings of mainstream economics" (xi). It has to be said that such a strategy, which, as they show, amounts at times to chicaning with economic indices, is nothing new because, as Häring and Douglas show, countries that achieve economic, military and political dominance achieve a dominance in economic science and create biases in their favor, which in the case of the United States "made the American model of capitalism appear superior to all others" (45-6). As today's crisis has revealed, this chicanery was endemic to the banking sector which has become the central locus of today's mutation of capitalism. Within that mutation, marked by the ascendency of finance, United States financial institutions are of central importance. If American Studies fails to see the role of banks, bankers, and of finance, it reduplicates the error of autistic

economics which have been accused of passing over the issue of money regardless of the fact that we more and more, as Richard Dienst perceptively recognized, live under its control. American Studies will hardly be the site where today's mind-boggling enormity of capitalism[18] will find an adequate explanation, but I will add that scholars working within the field will have to take cognizance of this reality as the context in which they work, a context in large part overshadowed by American hegemony. Working on the archive of a nation which is the exemplary nation of the capitalist social formation, they will explore to what extent the present mutation signalizes a repetition of the (non)identity of capital and to what extent it marks a historical difference.[19]

Doing American Studies on the background of the present money mutation aggravates the porousness of its borders. Namely, an engagement with the issues raised by that mutation positions the discipline on the brink of dissolving into a more overreaching project of thinking capital itself. American Studies ought to be willing to meet the challenge to think capital even if in doing so we have to restructure the fields of given knowledge, even if we have to dissolve our discipline into a broader research project. Needless to say, we will embark on it relying on economic knowledge that has not been co-opted in the manner Häring and Douglas describe. The implications of putting that broader research project on our agenda have been addressed by Ngai-ling Sum and Bob Jessop in their espousal of post-disciplinary approaches in political economy. According to them, these approaches recognize the "conventional nature and inherent limitations of individual disciplines and disciplinarity," and are "open to new ideas that may well be inconsistent or incommensurable with any or all established disciplines" (Sum and Jessop). If capital is to be assigned its rightful place in the agenda of American Studies, the practitioners in the field will have to embrace analyses that begin by "identifying specific problems independent of how they would be classified, if at all, by different disciplines" (Sum and Jessop). It comes as no surprise that Sum and Jessop, reviewing the intellectual traditions that are pertinent to such analyses, first mention Marxism whose "relevance derives from its ambition to provide a totalizing perspective on social relations as a whole in terms of the historically specific conditions of existence, dynamic, and repercussions of the social organization of production" (Sum and Jessop).[20] If American Studies deals with the totality of the United States then the pertinence of that observation is unquestionable. As an aside I note that John Blair has contended that "though

totalizing generalizations may not be possible," "generalizing within clearly defined limits is still indispensible to American Studies particularly those carried out on outside the USA" (qtd. in Heusser 26). I add that such generalizing, informed by a perspective on "social relations as a whole," will allow us to both refrain from overhasty pronouncements on the imminent demise of the American project and ask whether the present conjuncture has truly disabled the agency of the United States.

Let me map that conjuncture by citing Rob Wilson and William Spanos. In one of his readings of the Pacific rim Wilson states that "'America' is not so much the fixture of a national government or bounded cultural space as it is a transnational corporation with local roots" (22-23). Whatever appeal such a formulation might have it dangerously digests a history and a complex of power relations. William Spanos historicizes this development by dating it ("since the Vietnam war") uncovering its basic dynamic ("the United States, understood as a nation-state, has indeed been eclipsed by the rise of transnational capitalism") and adds a caveat ("but this does not mean that America is no longer an imperial center") of decisive importance to understanding the present conjuncture. In the sentence that follows Spanos names both the object of American Studies and the absence that I have argued has to be included into its research agenda: "It means, rather, that transnational capitalism has become 'American' – an ontologically grounded comportment toward other 'underdeveloped' worlds, from their way of perceiving reality to their political institutions, that assumes the latter's radical inferiority – and that its post-Cold War project is the 'Americanization' of the planet" (180). In line with the practice of American Studies which, as I have argued, has regularly had to test its theoretical paradigms by the evidence of its object I will substantiate Spanos's sweeping generalization by pointing to the evidence provided by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin in their magisterial study The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire (2012). Addressing American twentieth-century policies both at home and abroad they show how these reflect "the tensions that exist inside the American state by virtue of its being simultaneously the state of its own social formation and the state most responsible for the reproduction of global capitalism" (248). Their primary goal in the book is to show that in the passage from "Britain's only partially informal empire to the predominantly informal American empire" something much more was at stake than the replacement of Pax Britannica by Pax

Americana. Namely: “The American state, in the very process of supporting the export of capital and the expansion of multinational corporations, increasingly took responsibility for creating the political and juridical conditions for the general extension and reproduction of capitalism internationally” (6). Panitch’s and Gindin’s thorough economic/ political reconstruction of this “general extension” aptly substantiates Wilson’s epiphanic insight and Spanos’s philosophically-grounded diagnosis of America’s position in the world.[21] Such conceptualizations of the United States polity and the evidence that substantiates them have to be kept in mind when doing American Studies today. I will add particularly during the present crisis because if those who do American Studies abroad did feel a dose of schadenfreude – as Panitch and Gindin name it – at the damage that American capitalism had inflicted upon itself, that schadenfreude has disappeared as the crisis has spread from the epicenter worldwide. However, that spread is uneven. Namely, Panitch and Gindin observe that “US finance emerged not only more concentrated, but also still encompassing the general interest of capital amid a broader neoliberal consolidation of class power” (329). Today’s upbeat stock market indicators corroborate this conclusion.[22] If American Studies, to quote Nan Enstad again, is “to respond effectively to current states of emergency” (qtd. in Castronovo and Gillman 64), and if we doing it abroad have to address our own emergencies through our disciplinary practice, must we not always keep in mind the fact that, as Panitch and Gindin persuasively show, the reign of global capital subsists “under the aegis of the new American empire” (87), that the United States is the “manager of capitalism on a world stage” (63) and that it is precisely in this role that our object of study is deserving of our own efforts and of the attention of our students and the wider public.

Thinking the discipline in such a way undoubtedly implies an overstepping of academic boundaries. But, as shown above, an extracurricular surplus has been congenital to the discipline of American Studies. In the United States, the discipline has as a rule been envisioned as a politically engaged activist project. This can be seen, for example, when Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman preface their collection of essays with the following programmatic statement: “in pressuring the object of American Studies, we are questioning how the things that this disciplinary field studies – whether bits of material culture as small as a cigarette stub or as large as war – imply a political position or practice” (1). I cite this statement in conclusion because I am aware that

in arguing for the incorporation of “this terrible left-wing term capitalism,” to quote Howard Zinn (90), who definitely would have to be incorporated into a revised disciplinary protocol, into our practices, I am insinuating a political position. Namely, although capitalism seems less and less in need of camouflaging itself by euphemisms such as the free-market, free enterprise, etc.,[23] its naming is still largely of leftist provenance. Indeed my observations on American Studies do derive from this theoretical horizon. However, having said that, I will add that to the extent that I think the present historical moment has proven the continuing relevance of this tradition, it has also made me disbelieve in the possibility of alternatives. In calling upon Wilson, Spanos and Panitch and Gindin I have projected a world that seems to thwart emancipatory projects not only in the United States but also elsewhere. Although arguing for the presencing of capital in American Studies and accepting the impact this will have on the way we conceive and practice the discipline, I am hard put to envision an actualizable alternative. Doing American Studies I have come to feel a kinship with those like Perry Anderson who back in 2000, when re-launching New Left Review, wrote: “The only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historical defeat…. No collective agency able to match the power of capital is yet on the horizon. … But if the human energies for a change of system are ever released again, it will be from within the metabolism of capital itself” (16-17). Perhaps it is precisely the field of American Studies practiced outside the United States that actualizes and helps one recognize a position which another contributor to the New Left Review has articulated as the “Left without a future” (Clark 2012).

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[1] Defining “studies” as something that “signals a vaguely interdisciplinary approach without specifying which disciplines are broached or how they are bridged” (169), Julie Thompson Klein not only assigns to American Studies this originary role but also contends that this was the field where the interdisciplinary approach was first implemented.

[2] Having said that, I add that the work of the German scholar Winfried Fluck, that I no more than gesture to here, is an exception proving the rule.

[3] In her article “Doing American Studies in Croatia: What Have We Done, Where Do We Go from Here?” (2010) Jelena Šesnić gives a history of the discipline. What I will be doing in this paper is provide a possible answer to the second question in her title.

[4] As president of the Association for American Studies in South East Europe I write from first-hand experience of how the academic pursuit of American Studies is being implemented in Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. To a certain measure these notes have grown from that experience and my hope is that they will somehow help those who are engaged in the project. The original version of the paper was first delivered during a one-day workshop entitled “Applying Teaching Innovations in the American Studies Curriculum” in April 2013 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb.

[5] I use this phrase to indicate that emotive response scholars revert to when they feel that their field has been infringed upon, when they feel that the knowledge it provides has been underestimated, when they feel professionally and existentially endangered. Very frequently they revert to a rigorous policing of disciplinary boundaries, whether evaluating research, candidates for academic positions or when arguing for the importance of the discipline in front of students. Their claim for ultimate jurisdiction over a stock of knowledge grows in vehemence the greater is the social marginalization of the knowledge the discipline provides. If the reader feels that my sardonic use of the word pathos in a context where I argue for the disciplinarity of American Studies is misplaced or even self-contradictory, I can only direct him to my concluding remarks. More generally, I would contend that a discipline that knows itself will stay clear of pathos. If it does so, it will transcend emotive/existential considerations and open itself to self-reflection on knowledge itself in a conjuncture that has put the very raison d’etre of what we are doing in question.

[6] The occasions on which Obama was accused of not adhering to the idea of American exceptionalism are too numerous to cite. What strikes me, however, is that commentators outside the United States have not given sufficient attention to the disqualifying power these insinuations have within American politics. The fact that they pass beneath the screen of attention of foreign observers corroborates the distinctness of this mode of American self-projections.

[7]Stephen Shapiro critiques the turn in American Studies which coincides with what has established itself as Atlantic Studies: “the circumatlantic does not arise because of modernity in itself, but specifically capitalist modernity. The advantage of circum rather than trans is not a matter of replacing one geometric abstraction for another, a circle for a line, but that, even at the level of its name, the circumatlantic underlines how social geography is shaped by the circuits of capital flows, where the search for surplus-value contours the topography of encounters.” Concerning the legacy of slavery as one of the most important issues in new American Studies, he notes: “Modernity as an abstraction did not lead to oceanic slavery; nascent capitalism compelled Europeans to chase peoples around the globe. The Columbine exploration was not financed by the Spanish nobility because of any commitment to Enlightenment rationalism and the search for cartographic clarity, but that Iberian interest sought faster passage to India that would circumvent the Venetian stranglehold on Mediterranean sea lanes. African slavery was summoned because labor-intensive sugar-cane farming became the mode of English and French profiteering after their failure to break through Spanish naval barriers and directly appropriate South American precious metal mines” (Shapiro).

[8] As a rule, the field of knowledge which is usually assigned the task of retrieving origins is archeology. In this context we need to recognize the significance and implications of Christopher Matthews’s study The Archeology of American Capitalism. What Perry Miller’s pursuit of coherence for coherence’s sake amounts to can be fathomed from Michael S. Nassaney’s introduction to Mathew’s book: “in their pursuit of the science of humankind, anthropologists have sought to distinguish the cultural and natural elements of human experience. Paradoxically, culture – as an extrasomatic means of human adaptation – creates the illusion whereby the constructed, artificial, arbitrary, albeit historically constituted practices of daily life are made to seem natural to insiders who take for granted the subtle cues that orient the world. Perhaps the most powerful illusion that

contemporary Americans literally labor under is capitalism, an economic and social order geared for the creation of private profit that has been pervasive in structuring consumption patterns and landscapes since European encounters with indigenous peoples in the seventeenth century. Social scientists of various stripes would be remiss if they did not accord this phenomenon serious consideration in examining the constitution of society. Yet, just as capitalism erodes alternative forms of social interaction based in collective traditions of production and exchange, so too does it cover its tracks, making it notoriously difficult to monitor its pernicious social effects" (Matthews ix). I hold that American Studies has been more than remiss in not according capitalism serious consideration.

[9] Trachtenberg himself did not follow up on his convincing analysis of the Gilded Age. Nevertheless, I note that in his laudatory foreword to James Livingston's Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940 (1994) he praises Livingston's "defiance of customary boundaries," noting the book's "unexpected turns from one sort of discourse (a panorama of economic change) to another (an account of changing definitions of money) and yet another (the emergence of pragmatism as a formal philosophy and political-ethical program)" (xi). At the beginning of Livingston's book I find a formulation which pretty much coincides with my own reading of the American experience: "If we do not read and interpret the deadly poetry of political economy, we cannot make sense of American culture; for Americans have typically derived political meanings and moral significance from the distribution of property and the production of value through work" (3). After the reader finishes reading my paper it ought to be clear why I would assign Livingston's earlier publication Origins of the Federal Reserve System (1986) an important place in American Studies literature.

[10] One reason for referencing it here is to additionally foreground the different context in which those of us practicing American Studies abroad work when compared with our American colleagues. I quote how Rowe explains the fact that American Studies is "traditionally an activist field": "We work for social change and greater justice in classrooms, at conferences, on the streets, on the web, and through the many political organizations to which we contribute. These activities are for most of us not discrete. We encourage our students to get involved in the causes they find compelling; we work more than most academics for 'open classrooms' that include field work,

community involvement, volunteer work, and internships as part of the course assignments. The meaning of cultural politics is not to be sought in a particular method but in the intersection of these activities in progressive politics committed to the demystification of such separate domains as politics, economics, education, and activism" (19). Needless to say, even if we engage in such activities in our own societies, they are 'discrete' from the academic setting in which American Studies is conducted. Of course, this does not mean that the experience of teaching and doing research in American Studies cannot be empowering to our other activities.

[11] Obviously, Rowe's opting for this point of departure is a matter of choice. Rowe is clearly in the know about policies of American financial institutions: "Bear Stearns worked only for its own sake, borrowing more and more money at an increasingly rapid rate for the sake of its balance sheet on assets that, while substantial in their own right, increasingly appeared trivial when compared with the margin and other credit obligations of the firm. In the end, Bear Stearns was little more than its symbolic capital, which dwarfed its actual cash and material assets, and this symbolic capital could be sustained only by a reputation for ever-increasing growth that was unsustainable" (18). Anticipating my later argument, I opine that these policies ought to be incorporated in a more thorough manner into the agenda of American Studies.

[12] If people in American Studies had paid more heed to writers such as Don DeLillo, they would have had to take cognizance of the fact that DeLillo chose to title the last section of his novel Underworld (1998) "Das Kapital." If in the earlier stages of American Studies strenuous efforts were made to excavate evidence from literary texts to corroborate certain readings of American experience, I hold that one ought not treat DeLillo's chapter heading in a flippant manner. Viken Berberian's later novel Das Kapital only substantiates the claim that writers have been more perceptive of what was happening in the United States than those for whom the polity is the object of professional work.

[13]That "deidentificatory" momentum of capital is only a part of what Schumpeter, following in Marx's tracks, designated as its Creative Destruction, the fact that it is constantly in a process of change, never stationary. Many others have drawn upon, developed or selectively interpreted this aspect of Marx's reading of capital. Croatian readers will find a profound take on this matter in Ozren Žunec's 1996 introduction to Marx's thought and in his recent reworking and expansion of

the problematic (2012). Žunec convincingly argues that Marx's whole opus amounts to a destruction of the fundamental features of philosophy and that it sets forth principles incommensurate with the whole of Classic ontology and gives us a relatively complete although unsystematic "meontology." Žunec writes: "The society that knows the commodity and that emerges in 'the world of the commodity' does not have a form, does not have anything that is stable and differentiated, it is constant flow, transformation and change, production and exchange, that is – production, exchange and a 'haunting-object' 'form' not of something that is, of any kind of determinate and whatsoever being but of that what in traditional ontology is the opposite: of Nothing" (2012: 286). More than other readings of Marx, I have found his "meontological" take on Marx as both thought-provoking and relevant to thinking the present moment of capital.

[14] This absence of economics in the discipline has been noted, for instance, by Michael L. Parker in his study of "uncanny capitalism" when he contends that "few have read the American gothic in terms of its relationship to American capitalism" (222) and holds that this leads to the larger question "why the economic has been neglected by critics of American literature in general" (223). Pointing to authors who have focused on race and gender while excluding class, Parker observes: "while many critics have used the first two categories to produce a substantial body of readings and have devised sophisticated methods for discerning the presence of racial and gendered discrimination, they appear to have been far less interested in examining the presence of economic concerns within the works they investigate" (223).

[15] For an account of this development in economics see Ronnie Morrison's "Post-Autistic Economics" where he describes its inception and program.

[16] I have elsewhere argued (2013) for the centrality of Pynchon's opus in addressing the issue of American capitalism.

[17] A resurgence of interest in capitalism is evident elsewhere as well. A recent article that appeared in the New York Times entitled "In History Departments, It's Up with Capitalism" opens with the following observation: "A specter is haunting university history departments: the specter of capitalism. After decades of 'history from below,' focusing on women, minorities and other marginalized people seizing their destiny, a new generation of scholars is increasingly turning to

what, strongly, risked becoming the most marginalized group of all: the bosses, bankers and brokers who run the economy" (Schuessler).

[18] I am certain that many will share my bafflement when confronted with the numbers such as those in the following note: "The global financial system can safely be classified as a monster. The global financial system is now valued at USD 255,855,541,100,000 (almost 256 trillion) in size. This is an increase of around 140% since 2002. To put this into context, the Milky Way galaxy is estimated to contain between 200-400 billion stars. As a per cent of GDP, the global financial system has grown to be worth around 367% of global GDP. Good luck to all the central bankers out there who are trying to tame the monster" (Doyle).

[19] The story of American finance in that regard provides ample food for thought. As an example I mention Scott Reynolds Nelson's study of "American financial disasters" in which he shows, contrary to "pundits" who are telling us "that the economic turmoil the nation experienced in 2008-2009 was the first 'consumer debt' crash, built on junk consumer debt," that "America has seen numerous periods of similar financial decline, and in most cases consumer debt lay at the heart of it" (ix).

[20] Marx's presence in the United States ought to be of particular interest to people doing American Studies in the so-called postsocialist world where Marx has been all but ostracized. From newspapers, journals to scholarly work, not to speak of universities, his legacy has been reengaged in ways and in quantity that I can only hint at here. However, as Wolfram Elsner, for example, writes, one does not have to be a Marxist or "Marxologist" to recognize his relevance in attempting to understand what Elsner names "the cumulative and multiple crises of a degenerated capitalism." He contends that Marx's profit rate increasingly seemed to him to help "put into context and explain many of the new, stunning, and often disparate phenomena such as the financial crisis and continuing real-economic slack, reinforced redistribution by governments' policies, tightened austerity policies and subsequent double dips, the degeneration of the whole late-capitalist economy to a cemented global creditor-debtor system, the unleashed global resource speculation and land-grabbing, social decay, political legitimation crises, and the moral demise of the 'elites'" (133). I quote the passage because of the way it cumulatively describes the present moment but also because it implicates the fate of democracy that, we will agree, is always already associated

with American self-projections: “redistributing risks and values of the sizes implied, and saving the speculation industry by playing its gamble and betting ‘against’ it with taxpayer’s money will further generate social costs and increasingly become incompatible with democracy” (Elsner 157).

[21]István Mészáros maintains that the “state of the capital system as such” still remains only a “regulative idea” “despite all efforts dedicated in the post-Second World War period to realize it in the form of an international network of economic and political institutions – from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the OECD, GATT, and the United Nations” and adds: “under the more or less veiled dominance of the United States.” He continues: “Global capital is today as before devoid of its proper state formation because the dominant material reproductive units of the system cannot get rid of their ‘individuality.’ Indeed, they cannot get rid of a necessarily ‘combative individuality’ … because they have to operate in an inherently conflictual situation everywhere, given the untranscendable structural antagonisms of the capital system, from its smallest reproductive ‘microcosms’ to its most gigantic productive and distributive enterprises” (166).

[22] The cover page of the May11–17, 2013 issue of The Economist featured a head of a bull and the headline “Wall Street is back.”

[23] Thusly we can say that ideologues of capitalism have taken to heart the castigations the high priestess of capitalism Ayn Rand directed at her followers back in 1967: “The moral treason of the ‘conservative’ leaders lies in the fact that they … do not have the courage to admit that the American way of life was capitalism, that that was the politico-economic system born and established in the United States, the system which, in one brief century, achieved a level of freedom, of progress, of prosperity, of human happiness, unmatched in all the other systems and centuries combined” (194).

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