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IT'S ACADEMIC: AMERICAN STUDIES IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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My archive-the collection of resources I have drawn upon for my comments-includes, among other sources, a panel on international American studies held at the American Studies Association conference in Montreal in November 1999, the Wednesday Higher Education supplement of the Australian newspaper, and another supplement-this is one in the Derridean sense of the word-the Howard government. I hope to draw these threads together to focus on the present crisis facing American studies and, not coincidentally, this Association. To arrive at this point I take a tour through theoretical and disciplinary responses to the prevailing situation.

My title, ‘American studies in a time of crisis’, was suggested to me by current conditions. A global crisis currently exists in the sense that the US is once again at war. Within this context an effective American study is one that engages with issues of US international power, cultural difference, and war and peace. As an interdisciplinary project, American Studies is well placed to bring the necessary range of theoretical tools to bear on this topic. From its beginnings as a proponent of US exceptionalism, through its various approaches based on the study of myth and symbol, American studies has, in the process of critiquing a range of experience, reinvented itself as an innovative interdisciplinary series of endeavours. Recent work in American studies serves as a footnote here, illustrating numerous innovative studies. The ‘New Americanists’ series at Duke University press offers relevant examples, including Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts (Chadwick Allen), Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary (Paul Giles), and the edited collection Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics which includes essays on Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, the film The Alamo, starring John Wayne, rituals of public mourning, Native American performance, gay marriage, and the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. Each of the essays draws attention to the need to develop more complex, vibrant versions of democracy.

Despite its innovations and advances, however, I would argue that American studies continues to lag behind cultural studies in the critical interdisciplinary study of contemporary issues. Cultural studies is, it would seem, better prepared- or perhaps better suited- to react to immediate experiences. In certain cases this ability has had its downside-the popular response that is little more than a populist response, part of what Meaghan Morris has called ‘the banality of cultural studies’. In other ways, cultural studies has produced timely and strategic responses to current events.
Increasingly, though, distinctions between American studies and cultural studies are collapsing. American studies— as the examples from the ‘New Americanist’ series illustrate— is committed to the study of US culture, and a recent collection of essays on cultural studies in the US illustrates the emergence of what can more appropriately be called American cultural studies (Hartley). This move has addressed a problem which has plagued American studies— one commented on in almost every American Studies Association presidential address reprinted in American Quarterly for the past decade, at least— the absence of a unified theoretical perspective. An American cultural studies draws on the theoretical legacies of cultural studies— in particular its study of ideology, hegemony, and cultural difference— to inform itself. It is from the perspective of American cultural studies that certain useful approaches have merged to the current global crisis (one example here is a paper by Sean Cubitt in the latest issue of the International Journal of Cultural Studies on the aftermath of S11 in which he defines peace as the acceptance and celebration of difference).

The crisis of S11 is widespread. According to many commentators it marks what are perceived to be the certainties of the past from the uncertainty of the future. The editors of a US academic journal summarized the prevailing attitude when they claimed recently that ‘Of course, the events of September 11, 2001, marked a decisive break in all cultural events.’ The routinized ‘Of course’ here points to the almost seamless way in which S11 has merged with an existing fin de millennium discourse of apocalypticism.

Of course, not everything can be reduced to S11. There is another crisis facing American (cultural) studies— one that was bought home to me during a panel dedicated to discussion of the internationalization of American studies held at the American Studies Association conference in Montreal in 1999.

Bernard Mergen, editor of the journal American Studies International, and long a friend of ANZASA, invited me to speak at the session, which included participants from various American studies associations worldwide. Participants outlined national activities— including publishing and journal in the field— and the state or condition of membership in national associations Turkey seemed healthy and active; Czechoslovakia is developing a presence.

Among my comments I referred to a point that I would like to return to shortly (and lest my comments in Montreal sound discourteous to all of us here, I include myself in this observation)— I pointed out that the membership of ANZASA is greying.
The most interesting moment of the session came not in the discussion of ways to broaden American studies internationally - to connect American studies scholars and activities - but in the response to an announcement by two North Americanists that they had funding to cover participation in a forum on American studies to be held in Ohio. The general (though, admittedly, not total) response was an image out of Conrad - the Kurtzian ‘the horror, the horror’ replaced by the equally sober and chilling chant, ‘the money, the money’. I admit that I was also extremely interested in the financial opportunity. It had come to this, I realized, and it was always thus I suspect: issues of funding dominate.

I can ground this recognition firmly within the Australian context where, when every Wednesday I open the higher education section of Murdoch’s Australian newspaper I read of the current condition of the humanities and social sciences in Australia. Funding cuts. Job losses. The prioritisation of research (the latter likely to result in a focus on Australian studies-commendable in itself though carrying obvious implications for American studies).

Within the context of the Howard government’s attitude to tertiary education (and the Murdoch press is not alone in referring to a viscous process of attrition as ‘reform’) American studies- or as it exists in Australia, the study of things American- an interdisciplinary and broad project situated within the humanities and social sciences- is under threat. This is the real crisis American studies is facing.

The crisis intensifies when it is coupled with the graying of ANZASA membership. There will be no American studies in Australasia- no new scholarship of ‘things American’- if there are no new scholars in American studies (recent modest increases in ANZASA membership can’t contribute in any significant way to the expansion of American studies in Australasia. What is required here is a marked increase in membership).

With the risk of invoking a language and tone which we may have thought forgotten with the 1960s - the time has come - for ANZASA to seriously consider the ramifications of the current situation, and for the Association to become politically engaged with that situation. The time has come for ANZASA to become active in the current debate over the future of the humanities and the social sciences. The form this activity should take is something we should be concerned to address as soon as possible- in fora such as this, and through other avenues of communication at the disposal of the Association.
The future of American studies in Australasia - and any contributions it can make to the future of American studies internationally - becomes academic if academics in American studies don’t have a future.