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AMERICAN STUDIES FROM THE ANTIPODES?

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What does it mean to do American Studies in a place that has often been at the wrong end of the stick of US hard power and that is now the object of a kind of full-court press of public diplomacy efforts? The US State Department has directly supported many of the newly-established American Studies programs in the Middle East as part of its endeavor to win hearts and minds. The Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at American University of Beirut (AUB) has a very different genesis. Shortly after the World Trade Center attacks, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia offered New York City ten million dollars in aid, but when the Prince suggested that the United States should have a more balanced policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mayor Rudy Giuliani turned down the offer. A few weeks after the US invasion of Iraq, in response to what he referred to as a growing ‘gap’ between the US and the Arab world, the Prince then provided funding to establish CASAR as well as a second center at the American University in Cairo (See *Main Gate*). Edward Said had repeatedly recommended that AUB institute an American Studies program and urged other universities in the Arab World to do the same because ‘the United States is by far the largest, most significant outside force in the contemporary Arab world’ (Said, 1994: 356). Such programs have indeed proliferated in recent years: there are eight less than a decade old.¹ AUB’s center came into being as a response not to the events of 9/11 but to US actions in the wake of them—and in particular to the heightened projection of US power in the Middle East. In a discussion of US continental expansion in the mid-nineteenth century, the historical geographer Donald Meinig argued that ‘as the United States became a powerful, expansive force, every Indian society caught within its bounds was eventually plunged into crisis over how best to respond’ (Meinig, 1993: 182). Today the projection of US power—political, economic, and cultural—into the Middle East and beyond, means that people nearly everywhere must confront what we might call the American question (McGreevy, 2006).²

¹ These include degree programs or centers at the University of Bahrain, American University in Cairo, Al-Quds University in the West Bank, the University of Jordan, Georgetown University in Qatar, the University of Tehran, Queen Arwa University in Yemen, as well as the American University of Beirut.

² The American question is a matter of perception; some argue that the United States is simply the largest among a network of entities that currently dominate the globe; see, for example, Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004).



The American question has certainly propelled the expansion of American Studies in the Middle East, even as it has led to the decline of American Studies in Britain. In Lebanon, like many nearby countries, the current atmosphere is polarized. In such a context, the challenge of teaching and research in American Studies is distinctive in several ways. Let me briefly outline how we have responded to this challenge at the Center for American Studies and Research.

First, we have felt compelled to focus on issues of public moment and to ignore what seems trivial. This does not mean that we avoid the analysis of popular culture, sports, film or literature, but that we constantly connect them to matters of political, economic and cultural power. While this approach certainly characterizes much American Studies work in places like the United States, the exigencies of our immediate situation give it an insistent urgency.

Second, in the face of polarizing pressures—pro- and anti-American—we have prioritized academic values. Since we cannot be a mouthpiece for US public diplomacy, nor for any ideology, our commitment is to thinking and questioning. We can accept no excuse to close off thinking and questioning, to evade that responsibility (see in this regard Readings, 1997).

Third, we cannot help but think about how the Middle East is related to what George Bush calls the 'Homeland'.³ During the 2006 Summer War, when US-made bombs pounded Lebanon, President Bush repeatedly stated that it was too soon to stop the asymmetrical violence which Condoleezza Rice named the 'birth pangs of a New Middle East' (Rice, 2006). Such experiences led us to focus our thinking on the relational dynamics by which a certain vision of our region serves to help constitute the 'Homeland'. More fundamentally, these experiences teach us to question the processes that project a bifurcated world, a world of homeland and antipodes.

Finally, the experience of thinking about America from a place like Beirut can lead to basic questions about the way things work, the value of the current world order. How much violence, how much injustice, must we accept in the name of maintaining that order? On a rafting trip, one can steel one's self while passing through rapids in anticipation of calmer waters ahead, but when it is whitewater all the time, one may begin to question the journey itself. In a place that is unmoored, that the world order consigns to disorder and destruction, one cannot help but wonder why this disorder has become necessary for world order.

The fact that attempting to do American Studies in the Middle East precipitates such fundamental questions is hardly a promise that answers will come from such a place. To be honest about the situation, we must admit that because we are understaffed and isolated from the places where American studies has its institutional centers of gravity, the intellectual firepower to produce sustained new perspectives is sadly lacking. What we can offer are questions. And we can offer them relentlessly.

³ The idea of relational dynamics has been developed by critical human geographers; see, for example, Massey (2005).

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