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All topical manuscripts should be directed to the Editor via online submission forms available at *RIAS* website ([www.iasa-rias.org](http://www.iasa-rias.org)). General correspondence and matters concerning the functioning of *RIAS* should be addressed to *RIAS* Editor-in-Chief:

Michael Boyden

K.U.Leuven

Faculteit Letteren

Departement Literatuurwetenschap

Blijde-Inkomststraat 21

B–3000 Leuven

Belgium

e-mail: [michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org](mailto:michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org)

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## AMERICAN STUDIES AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL HABITATS

**Mary Louise Pratt**

New York University

Seyed Mohammad Marandi, Patrick McGreevy, Liam Kennedy, Li Jin and Sun Youzhong have written four illuminating accounts of the state of American Studies in Iran, Lebanon, Ireland, and China. Most striking, perhaps, are the contrasts among the expansive exuberance and optimism of the picture from China, the sense of isolation, marginality and beleagueredness expressed by the contributors from the Middle East, and the slightly jaded pragmatism of the account from Ireland. The contrasts can be traced in part to the same historical process: the geopolitical shift marked by the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the US as a monopolar superpower, and its creation of a new imperial enemy in the Islamic world. China, Lebanon, Ireland, and Iran occupy different places in this narrative. American Studies, according to Li Jin and Sun Youzhong, took off as China's isolationism began to dissolve after the cultural revolution. Its status today as 'the most prosperous area of international studies in China' is surely linked with China's full-fledged move into the global consumer economy and its new status as the industrial competitor of the US, its supplier of cheap goods, and its principal lender.

This extraordinary shift offers at least one encouraging message for struggling colleagues in the Middle East: a lot can change in a very short time. In the present, however, these colleagues find themselves located not on a wave of expansiveness, but at a crux of collision, suspicion and antagonism. Fascinating in Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Patrick McGreevy's accounts are the multiple paths by which American Studies programs are coming into being in the Middle East. Some, like the center Seyed Mohammad Marandi describes at the University of Tehran, are established by national governments seeking to create scholars who can engage with a manifestly hostile power. Others, mentioned by Patrick McGreevy, are being established by the US government itself, apparently to gain an academic foothold for its own interests, while others, including the one at American University in Beirut where McGreevy works, derive from the critical and often anti-imperial academic programming developed in US universities in the 1970s and 80s (Kennedy offers yet another narrative of origins from Dublin). McGreevy's fascinating story of the origins of his own program illuminates the choices presented by the post-9/11 moment. Supposing Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal's gift had been accepted with an agreement that he and Giuliani would agree to disagree about US policy on the Palestinians? Supposing New

MARY LOUISE PRATT



Yorkers had been asked to debate the issue and inform themselves? How quickly and forcefully the extraordinary openness created by the disaster of 9/11 was corralled into stark dramas of good and evil, and into the scenario McGreevy notes: zones of chaos that legitimate particular concepts of order.

Such polarities, however, neither foster nor survive serious academic inquiry. This is an irony I have observed over 30 years of engagement with another cold-war driven academic field, Latin American Studies. Left to their own devices, area studies programs will attract a lot of people who are actually interested in the areas under study. Some of them will have significant life experiences or historical connections there. These obvious facts make area studies fairly inefficient at sustaining relations of confrontation and enmity, as they have often been asked to do. Axes of good and evil are held in place by ignorance, not curiosity-driven learning.

In his account of the Clinton Institute at University College Dublin, Liam Kennedy invokes another key dynamic shaping the institutionalization of knowledge and inquiry today: the entrepreneurial vision of the corporate university. The Clinton Institute was founded by a competitive bidding process in which universities competed for both money and prestige. It is 'an investment in the symbolic capital of Irish-US relations'. The term 'symbolic capital' helpfully links the generative energies driving the internationalizing trend in American Studies with the single fact of the emergence of the US (and self-promotion) as a lone global superpower, the only bandwagon in town. How to operate with a modicum of authenticity in this instrumentalized, entrepreneurial environment? By devising research projects attached in significant ways to local reality and history, Kennedy argues, projects arcing out through the relationship with the US bring students into new relations with the home environment. This is an approach that to a degree seeks to de-center the 'area' of area studies.

The fairly benign scenario Kennedy describes is itself a product of the history of Irish-US relations. The two have never been enemies. Where enmity is involved, as in the other contexts described, area studies tends to occupy an edge between political expedience (a policy mouthpiece) and inexpediency (a thorn in the side of empire). One common response to the political inexpediencies of area studies is to prevent these fields from developing freely, by policing them from the outside. Practices of this kind have gained ground under the current US administration. As I prepared this text in late January 2008, for instance, a summary of 2007 allocations for foreign language and international education in the United States arrived by e-mail. Programs within the Department of Education received tiny increases in some cases, and cuts in others.<sup>1</sup> The significant increases went to education programs run by the State and Defense Departments, where access is often tied to citizenship, security clearances, or government service, particularly in security agencies.<sup>2</sup> The figures were sympto-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, funding for the Foreign Language Assistance program increased from \$23.8 million to \$25.7 million, while International Education and Foreign Language Studies grew from \$105.7 million to \$109 million.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the State Department's Education and Cultural Exchange programs grew from \$445.3 million to \$505.4 million, and the National Security Education Program increased from \$16 million to \$44.7 million. The National Endowment for the Humanities, incidentally, lost funding, from \$140.9 million to \$132.5 million.

matic of what has come to be called the 'securitization' of international and foreign language education.<sup>3</sup>

Such efforts are often opposed vigorously by universities and educational officers within government. A day later, for example, I received another message: the National Research Council, a body of senior officials with both government and academic experience, appointed by the National Academies, published a report condemning the securitization of academic inquiry. The limitations being imposed on university research by the current administration in the name of national security are, they said tactfully, 'unnecessarily closing [us] off from the world in a futile effort to protect ourselves [and] will only isolate us from an increasingly integrated and competitive global community'.<sup>4</sup> May these and other clearer heads prevail in the days to come. Both inside and outside the US, American Studies has a stake in the outcome.

I cannot end without mentioning an experiment in which American Studies recently engaged at my own institution, New York University. Wherever it exists, American Studies often occupies vulnerable institutional structures—centers, programs—that lack the stability of university departments, and are unable to appoint their own permanent faculty. Five years ago, six such programs at NYU began a conversation to join together and form a new university department. Among other things, the change would enable them to make their own faculty appointments instead of relying on the appointment powers of traditional departments (which by definition favored more traditional disciplinary fields). The new department, called Social and Cultural Analysis, brought together programs in American Studies, Metropolitan Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Africana Studies, Asian-Pacific American Studies, and Latino Studies. Some thirty-five faculty have all or part of their academic line in the department, and, thanks to supportive deans, the department has appointed two new professors each year since it came into being. The graduate program in American Studies is one of the jewels in its crown. Our experiment has been successful so far, and we are finding real enjoyment in the challenging process of making everything up as we go along. We look forward to reporting on our experiment as it unfolds.

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<sup>3</sup> Equally worrisome, probably, was the paltriness of the amounts on all fronts. Announcing a bold new initiative in foreign language study, the president requested \$114 million in funding, a sum that has no significance alongside the deficiency in language expertise in the United States. How, one wonders, do such sums compare to China's investment in language and international studies? Or to a day's expenditures in Iraq?

<sup>4</sup> The council mentioned specifically, conditions on some government-funded research that forbid foreign nationals from participating or stop the publication of university research results, and 'export controls' rules that restrict the kinds of technology and information that can be sent to foreign scholars overseas or be accessed by those working in this country.