AMERICAN STUDIES AT 'PETRU MAIOR' UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The article assesses the development of American Studies since the Romanian Revolution in December 1989 and the impact of American Studies on cultural development, civil society and democracy, with special focus on Romanian higher education. The account of American Studies in Romania and in my university will highlight some important values of American higher education which I experienced or researched as a NYU visiting scholar in 2009, and which made me wish to import to my Romanian university. Does the ocean divide or connect us? My experience has given me the conviction that the teaching of American Studies, as essential as it is in this age of globalization, must include the promotion of the educational values of American higher education, as well as the rich traditions of Romanian higher education.

Keywords: tradition/liberal education, academic constraint/freedom, rote memorization/analytical skills, domesticate/liberate humans, moulder/facilitator

"Democracy is not so much a form of government as a set of principles"
"I believe in democracy, because it releases the energies of every human being" (Woodrow T. Wilson)
"*Democratic education ought to liberate humans rather than domesticate them*" (O'Brien)

Democracy in Education

As a six-week Fulbright scholar at NYU Steinhardt Multinational Institute of American Studies I had the opportunity to deepen my understanding of American society, culture and institutions. The program also aimed at strengthening curricula and improving the quality of teaching about the USA in my university. The reconciliation of American diversity with national unity was the main focus of the program. An invaluable experience, the multinational group, including eighteen scholars from eighteen different cultures, was offered to explore American culture and values, fostered critical thinking by exposing us to all facets of American culture and the nature of democratic process in America.

The gains I had from this scholarship are manifold. The present article will highlight some important values of American higher education which I experienced or researched and which made me wish to import to my Romanian university. Promoting the educational values of the American higher education, starting from the rich traditions of Romanian higher education, while eluding misperceptions held by colleagues and students about the nature of American education, is a main target.

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Democracy needs education and education has to be democratic. The cultural role of American democracy is considered the key in defining the USA nation. Typically every American today has the same basic values and traits that have given America its identity. After studying them it's easy to understand why America is so great. Americans have always had core values. Individual liberty, education, and rocky individualism are only a few. Individual liberty is the cornerstone of American values. Less concerned with history, always future oriented, with firm belief in progress through own forces (unlike European fatality, its cult for history and the existence of empowered people). Action, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, hard work, material wealth, competition, and conservation of environment contribute to the building up of the American exceptionalism and uniqueness.

The value of a true democracy consists in creating modern personalities that are independent, active, interested in new cultural and intellectual experiences. A more informal educational process, like the American one is, encourages students to inquiry and debate. The greatest challenge teachers face is to help students think and understand, not just memorize. It is an education that helps children find their own voices (Cf. Edwards, 1993, quoted in O'Brien).

We need an education that supports the development of different individuals. And we need teachers who promote diversity, as Eisner rightly asserts. In sum, as O'Brien argues in his article, democratic education ought to liberate humans rather than domesticate them. Such an education expands on judgmental opinions, desire to understand and solve problems in ways never tried before, ability to explore by using imagination. These habits of heart and mind need educators who can help students develop these critical and thinking habits, help them become caring and questioning.

Woodrow T. Wilson, the president who led the United States through World War I, defined democracy as a set of principles that released the energies of every human being; in other words he believed in the power of American liberal democracy to enable man to obey society's principles but also to create his own principles that will help him think, express, and create independently, that is, be self-reliant and self-responsible. The underpinning principles of American democracy refer thus to social equality and respect for the individual within a community, in our case the academic community, competition for office, and freedom of speech.

The American society is entirely based on independence, individuality, change, and mobility.

Education in the US is student-centered. The educator is seen as a facilitator. The student is responsible in a sense for his/her own learning. A big part of the learning process takes place through questioning and conversation. The teacher will ask probing questions, while the students will be encouraged to question and debate. The students will often interrupt even in the middle of a lecture, asking for clarifications, making comments, challenging. There is a constant dialogue between teacher and student. To

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become a teacher in America requires to be endowed with the qualities to face the challenges that keep all students connected to learning.

Unlike this flexible, student oriented educational system, the rigidity of the Romanian educational system deprives students of their innate sense of curiosity, of the creativity and analytical thinking that characterize American education. Unfortunately, Romania has not yet found a balance between rule of law and democratic values. Based on rote memorization and disengagement, the teacher molds the students. He lectures, while the students listen and learn. We have thus an education that constraints rather than liberates.

Since the fall of the Communist Regime in December 1989, Romania in general, and Romanian higher education in particular, have been striving to overcome the communist legacy, which consists of poor infrastructure (which also refers to staffing and professional engagement), dated materials, restricted access to information through books and internet, lack of modern equipment, and inadequate information and communication technologies. During the twenty-one-year post communist period, some progress has been made. However, Romanian information science education is lagging behind their counterparts in Western Europe. The inadequate state budgets only deepen the gap between the East and the West; the admission of Romania to the European Union (EU) in 2007, although greatly expected, did not bring much improvement and modernization.

Libraries have a very limited number of online catalogs. Reference services, as they are known in the northern European countries and on the North American Continent, are almost inexistent. Students have limited access to Internet connections in universities and at home.

The liberal education practiced in American universities is not limited to or established by traditional attitudes or dogmas regarding the educational process. It is an education that helps children find their own voices and communicate their own messages (Cf. Edwards, 1993, quoted in O'Brien).

After the 1989 Revolution the situation has changed drastically in Romania. Especially in times of political tensions, teachers need to intensify their efforts to explore new methods, themes, and courses for teaching culture. Considering the role of USA in the process of globalization, English tends to become the lingua franca of globalization.

Under such new conditions, one main scope of higher education after 1990 has been the promotion of educational values of the British and then American higher education adjusted to the rich Romanian traditions.

Launched in USA at the end of the 1920s, in Romania American Studies set off only after 1989 (Degree Programs, BA, MA, and Centers of American Studies in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Constanța, Timişoara, and Sibiu).

Before 1989, only American Literature was taught to students majoring or minoring in English. After 1989, after the fall of communism, Romania's transition to democracy started by reforms in every sector of society, education included. The founding of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in American Studies was one such

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challenge which proved to be a landmark in Romanian higher education by its inclusion on the national list of specializations. Including the program on the national list of specializations was a long and difficult process which ended only in 2007, despite its ancient recognition in the Western world.

Old, rigid institutional structures and approaches to teaching began gradually to be replaced by flexible, innovative, interdisciplinary and updated approaches; new courses appeared such as Film Studies, Mass Media and Popular Culture, Gender Studies, Visual Arts, etc. The program, as Ioana Luca from the University of Bucharest asserts, "was intended to analyze American Civilization in its origins, ideals, and historical development. Its inter- and trans-disciplinary approach, utilizing, besides history, the resources of literature, political science, economics, sociology, philosophy, and the fine arts, offered students the flexibility to work across discipline and address American Culture through a variety of perspectives and methodologies … providing ample opportunity for creative diversity." (3) The interdisciplinary character is achieved through specialists from other Romanian and American teachers from a wide range of historical, cultural, sociological, psychological, literary and anthropological fields of study.

These American Studies deal with the intertwining of American and European realities relating to the pragmatic world we live in (capable of ensuring a pragmatic education for students' prospective careers). Highly interactive, the program opens pathways "to a better understanding of transatlantic stereotypes…, as well as to a more accurate evaluation of the existing similarities and differences between American and European cultural patterns … as well as [to] the development of their analytical skills by means of comparative approaches" (Luca 30-31), as Cristina Chevereşan from University of Timişoara rightly points out.

Even if few universities across Romania have undergraduate or postgraduate American Studies programs, American Culture and Civilization have become important components of their curricula – illustrating the growth and diversification of American Studies in Romania in a relatively short period of time.

Exchanges (cultural and training programs) are established through the Romanian Fulbright Committee, the Romanian Association of American Studies (RAAS) and also European Society of English Studies (ESSE). Conferences are organized yearly by these two professional associations on topics related to transatlantic dialogues, the role of American culture across the world, reflections on the European and American spaces, the impact of the interdisciplinary American model upon the Romanian education, concepts of multiculturalism and transnational literary canon, canons revisited in a globalizing age, multiculturalism and literary canon, American and Romanian perceptions, Multicultural Selves, Mainstream and Minority Studies, etc.

American Studies identify the American space "as a space of reflection for the Romanian cultural identity and uses the interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives … to create a theoretical background adequate for the changes and negotiations appeared within the Romanian cultural identity inside the post-colonial post-communist

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marginalization… to the opening towards global, cosmopolitan and transnational structures of post-adherence to the European Community" (translation from Mihăilă 14)

Given the role of USA in the process of globalization, and the tendency of English to become the lingua franca of globalization, the transatlantic perspective engages the Romanian cultural space in a dialogue with the globalization culture, allowing for the reciprocal impact of these spaces. (translation from Mihăilă 14)

American Studies at 'Petru Maior' University

Although we hardly have a tradition in American Studies, there are quite a lot of teachers with a PhD in American Literature; two of them had the unique chance to explore this vast field of American Studies as participants in a study program that took place in New York, the cultural capital of American Studies.

I am extremely grateful for being accepted in this study program as a representative of a university which, although small, with very few contact possibilities and modest library facilities, has well-prepared and dedicated teachers and students who deserve the opportunity for professional growth given on a regular basis to teachers and students from larger universities. A most prestigious program, this exchange helped me introduce a positive change in my area of specialization, American Culture and Civilization, in education, in general, and in my community, in particular.

As an experienced professional but with no prior experience in the USA, this program helped me first to clarify the curricular goals and translate them into objectives and, secondly, enabled me to design more realistic syllabuses; eventually, it helped me to improve the quality of my teaching through accommodating my substantial knowledge of the thematic area of the Study Institute to the diversity of curricula and teaching materials. The first-hand experience in NYU allowed me to construct an intercultural, inclusive curriculum based on intercultural approach to teaching that promotes mutual respect, i.e. the intercultural Romanian student will learn how to explore the American Culture without recourse to crass stereotyping, to respect it in its own context, without necessarily subscribing to it, and to respond to it in such a way that the others will be inclined to understand and respect the learner's own position.

I personally have had a long tradition in fostering interest in American Culture and Civilization. Our university, however, has not yet established any student and staff exchange programs with American universities and has hosted no Fulbright lecturers.

In both the philology and modern languages study programs, courses in American literature, culture and civilization feature extensively. We also have two MA programs, one in "Gender Studies from a Cultural Perspective" and one in "British-American Discourse and Intercultural Perspectives" where I teach courses on "Woman, Culture, and Society", "Literary Discourse and Intercultural Perspectives", and "Gender and the Media" with a transatlantic cultural approach. All this is supported logistically by the existence of a Resource Room that hosts more than 4,500 volumes.

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These are some reasons that bound us to set up a tradition in American Studies in our university. The programs we would like to set up include courses based on American models striving to train the skills held in high esteem in the American education system, some of which have been mentioned in this paper.

The insight into American BA and MA programs made us envisage setting up an MA in Transatlantic Studies and an interdisciplinary degree program in History and American Studies.

We have also thought of setting up a Circle on "A Transatlantic Perspective on Americanism", which aims to approach America from the perspective of the outsider, a category to which we all belong. Students are invited to participate in this Circle on Americanism, which views active and creative contribution as well as an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach to American and Romanian Culture and Civilization. Our perception of America has been defined as 'transatlantic'; we are conditioned by being Eastern Europeans, Romanians, by our communist past, by our national cultural heritage, etc. The concept of the mirror has been suggested as first theme for 2010. The mirror allows us, at different degrees of accuracy, to obtain a more or less realistic image of America. We perceive America through mirrors of various sorts. The question of debate is whether the America in the 'mirror' is imaginary or real. And then the next question is to what extent is this mediated image responsible for our transatlantic representation of America.

These activities and debates aim not only to offer students a comprehensive overview of the USA as a cultural identity, but also to train critical thinking and inquisitive interest in the discipline. As to the questions of 'What is American Culture?' and 'Who is it represented by?', we would say it is a way of life, hence its all-encompassing fields of study: literature, mass media (printed and visual), music, etc. We want to familiarize our students with key American concepts such as globalization, multiculturalism, autonomy and pluralism, postcolonialism, tolerance, hybridity, acculturation and enculturation, etc.

Last, but not least, an American Corner through a partnership between US Embassy in Bucharest and "Petru Maior" University of Tg. Mureş would contribute to the empowerment of American Studies in our university and community.

Conclusion

Lines for improvement are many but, basically, they orbit around mentality. The 'westernizing of mind', behavior and practices will mean more concern for research and quality of the teaching act, more responsibility on both the students' and teachers' part, more commitment to the educational process and better teacher-student communication.

Shifting values is definitely needed, though it is not always welcomed, nor is it easy. As Winston Churchill said, "To improve is to change. To be perfect is to change often". Romanian universities, if they are committed to quality and perfection, should accept and manage the challenge of change. (Chiper 713). Rote should not be banished but it just should not be a primary tool. You cannot think if you do not remember. A

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balance between the traditional, memory-based European pattern and the modern liberal, pragmatic, skilled-based American pattern would turn our culture and education into a dynamic balancing act between cultural change and preservation.

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