A RECONFIGURATION OF AMERICANISM: RECEPTION SPACE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Dana RUS[1]

Abstract

The present paper presents and analyzes the current assumption of Americanism in the circumstances of the contemporary accusations of "cultural hegemony" and globalization. In accordance with the principles of "New Americanism" regarding the role and function of Americanism in nowadays world, this study suggests some directions of research based on notions of cultural identity, cultural exchange, cultural mobility, contact zones and proposes a shift of focus towards the space of reception of the American culture.

Keywords: Americanism, reception space, cultural mobility, cultural exchange

The present study is an attempt to address a current trend in the interpretation of the role, function and importance of the American culture in the conditions of the increasingly globalized world that we are living in. The starting point of this study is a hypothesis which has been scholarly explained and sustained in many forms throughout history[2]. It pertains to the perception of the American cultural space as an alternative space, juxtaposed to the physical territory, being essentially a discursive invention facilitated by a perception which is mediated by myths and symbols which are specific to the rhetoric of the exceptionalist discourses. The present study shifts the focus at the level of the reception of the cultural communication of the American space, in a perspective which is likely to provide a more narrowed-down image of Americanism and one which should be in more accordance with the postmodernist condition laying special emphasis on subjectivities, on particulars and on marginalities.

Spatiality, perspective, distance and context (geographical, ideological, social, historical, cultural) are considered to be essential elements of the perception of the American culture, thus providing its several interpretational values. The perception from a distance of the American cultural space, in a transatlantic perspective, via multiple traditional and modern communication channels creates the conditions of a specific type of reception, conditioned by the receiver's European / Romanian context. The argument of shifting the focus from the space of production of Americanism to the space of reception, in a multidisciplinary approach which combines historical, sociological, ideological and cultural considerations can find justifications at various levels.

[1] Lecturer, PhD, *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş

[2] Among the first scholars who introduced the concept of America's fictionality is Edmundo O'Gorman, in *The Invention of America : An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1961.

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The first justification of such an approach constitutes a reaction to what has come to be regarded as a cliché in the description of the contemporary cultural phenomenon, which abuses of concepts such as "globalization", "cultural imperialism", "cultural hegemony", "cultural war", all in relation with American culture and subcultures. At the end of the previous century, when these concepts were merely beginning to become reality, there were voices who urged for the reconsideration of Americanism and pleaded for its interpretation in a larger context, more suitable for its accurate perception given the realities of the world. Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez (1996) claimed that American studies needed to be contextualized in a "critical internationalism"[3] and they called for "a new kind of scholarship about the U.S."[4] What their article mainly implies is a need which is perceived as urgent, in the increasingly globalized world, of reconsidering the paradigms of American studies and to resituate them in a broader global context which should be more consistent with and truthful to the current stand of Americanism in the world.

In a similar approach, Norman R. Yetman and David M. Katzman (2000) confess a sense of perceived "uneasiness" with what they call "an insular focus" within American studies scholarship which is seen as "inconsistent with and oblivious to the new economic, political, social, demographic and cultural realities at the end of the American century"[5]

This re-contextualization of American studies and of Americanism which the contemporary world has made inevitable triggers a reconsideration of the factors involved in the process of cultural communication. Once the "insular focus" repudiated by Norman R. Yetman and David M. Katzman had lost its predominant characteristic in informing the American canon, a reconsideration of the larger context of its reception was the next natural approach. The approach of Americanism in a spatial perspective, one in which distance becomes the significant element and the essential factor in the correct assimilation of the message of cultural communication thus becomes a very actual one, part of the postmodern paradigm of interpretation which lays strong emphasis on the receiver's decisive role and on his/her subjectivity in interpreting cultural messages.

This decentrism of American studies is currently the main direction of the study of Americanism at a global level, marked by a perceived spatial turn as a new modality of approach which tends to become general and turn into a norm. The exceptional character of the American culture, perceived not qualitatively, but motivated by its historical and cultural realities, determines the necessity of a cultural mutation at the level of its global reception, a mutation which should consider the spatial perspective as the determining factor. This perspective determines an extremely topical reconsideration of the American cultural phenomenon, founded upon a reformulation of the entire concept of western

[3] Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez, "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism", *American Quarterly* 48:3 (September), 1996, pp. 475-490.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Norman R. Yetman and David M. Katzman. "Globalization and American Studies", *American Studies*, 41:2/3 (Summer-Fall), 2000, pp. 5-10.

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civilization through its geographical uprooting and its transformation into a global model, a "labyrinth of Euro-American relations"[6]

This reconsideration of perspectives pertaining to the transnational turn of American studies also implies topical concepts such as cultural mobility and intercultural exchange, which are characteristic of the so-called "New Americanism". This new approach marks a departure from the traditional practices of American studies, rooted in the monocultural norms of the exceptionalist-type discourses, thus being in concordance with the multicultural imperatives of American studies.

In this context, there is a perceived double phenomenon at an international level: on the one hand, we note the internationalization and re-territorialization of Americanism and, on the other hand, a renunciation at the direction of the old American school. This school, whose theoretical framework was built in the period of the Cold War, was based on the equation myth – symbol – image and by incorporating this equation in exceptionalist monocultural discourses it was meant to create and impose a set of americanist attitudes. The "New Americanism", conceptualized and given theoretical shape by scholars such as Donald Pease, Philip Fisher, Jane Tompkins, Jonathan Arac, Sacvan Bercovitch, Myra Jehlen, Laurence Buell represents a break this type of unitary exceptionalist discourse in favor of moments and processes of intercultural exchange, from the perspective of the globalization of American studies. This openness of Americanism radically changes the balance of the factors involved in the process of production, transmission and reception of the American cultural phenomenon. Once Americanism loses the centrality of its exceptionalist discourse, the emphasis is directed towards marginal groups, fact which leads to an increased importance of the role played by the interpretation of the plurivocal discourses of the American culture. The perspective of the reception becomes essential and it is conditioned by certain ideological, social, cultural and historical contexts which shape the received image of America.

In this renewed and reinterpreted assumption of Americanism, it is important to find and use adequate scholarly resources which should permit the proper analysis of the American cultural signs from the perspective of their mobility and intercultural spatiality, of the versatility of their perception according to the different contexts of the reception spaces. These theoretical tools can subsequently be used for particular purposes of analyzing the ways that American culture manifests itself in different spaces of reception. These different spaces of reception lead to particularized interpretations of the cultural message, according to the ideological, cultural and historical character of the reception space and the purposes of the cultural exchange. These particularized interpretations are likely to create the conditions for the emergence of some dominant patterns of representation of American culture in different spaces of reception and for the critical conceptualization of the mechanisms which assist the emergence of these patterns.

[6] Tiziano Bonazzi, "Europe, Zeus and Minos, or the Labyrinth of Euro-American Relations", Ricerche di Storia Politica, 2004 (1)

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The major outcome of this approach to Americanism is its opening to multicultural reception, through the extraordinary diversity of some apparently disparate themes belonging to some domains which were once considered marginal, but which find their privileged positions in the postmodern world. The refusal of the cohesive element of the old American scholarship, element which conferred its singularity to a culture which was expressed and articulated through exceptionalist discourse has determined a mutation at the level of the reception of the American culture in the world. This reception is no longer unitary; it is subjected to a set of cultural norms and practices.

This process of transatlantic mirroring of the image of America according to the particular subjectivity of the reception space may also be considered a source of identity building for the recipient's inner structure. The cultural image of America has always been a comparative standard; this assumption is particularly valid in the case of the Romanian space of reception, which is a liminal one, situated on the geographical border between the East and the West, but also on an ideological border, between its communist past and its profoundly European cultural values and beliefs.

In order to achieve a coherent mechanism of representation we suggest a limited number of methodologies and approaches which are considered essential for the reinterpretation of Americanism.

Firstly, the terminology that we suggest as a proper tool for such an approach is an interdisciplinary one, making use of such concepts such as: cultural identity, spatial identity, multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, cosmopolitism, alterity, frontierism and contact zone, alienation, cultural mobility, intercultural exchange.

Secondly, any approach to this new interpretation of Americanism should inevitably include references to modalities of constructing American cultural identity as an intentional concept, culturally constructed, which can be communicated via different informational means. In this respect, it is useful to approach identity from the perspective offered by Samuel Huntington, using the equation "identity = imagined self"[7], which accentuates the role of the imaginative processes in creating the idea of cultural identity. Similarly, Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities"[8] is relevant in this new approach to the global concept of the American identity insofar as it describes national identity as an abstract concept, an imaginary product of the members of a certain community. The importance of this theory is given by the enlargement of the space where cultural identities are shaped, beyond geographical borders, in an approach which favors the transatlantic perception of cultural landmarks.

Linked to the concept of flexible identities is the idea of the alterity as a psychological necessity in defining individual and group identity. The different aspect of the American culture can be interpreted as cultural standards for the shaping and

[7] Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

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reinforcing identities of the reception space, either by similarity or by opposition. In analyzing the reception and the different modes of manifestation of the American culture worldwide, as well as the diversity of the effects that it produces, it would be relevant to apply Vamyk Volkan's interpretation of the "other" seen as another image of the self, a repudiated or rejected one, for various reasons[9]. Volkan's "other" is seen as a rich source of identity and is used as an external stabilizer of one's sense of identity. This perspective of the "other" is even more meaningful from the transatlantic – and mediated - perception of the "other", the messenger of the hegemonic American culture, opening the way to interpretations which involve the concepts of marginality, centrality and their reconfiguration in the postmodern times.

The change of focus from the space of production to the space of reception of Americanism and the dynamics of cultural signs is bound to take into account the paradigm of cultural mobility. The 'hegemonic" character of the American culture is part of a larger cultural concept which James Clifford calls "traveling cultures"[10]. This concept is centered on the complexity of localizing culture in nowadays post-neocolonial conditions, due to the multitude of cultural connections. Real spatial mobility, which was once the only means of intercultural connection, is nowadays replaced by forces which cross the cultural space and have a great impact at the level of their reception. This traveling aspect of culture is valid in the case of Americanism which, especially under its popular forms, travels extensively throughout space in a global way: television, virtual communication, globalizing economic practices.

In close connection to the concept of the traveling culture, it is also relevant to interpret the new assumption of Americanism with reference to what James Clifford calls "border" (which is culturally and semantically different from the typically American spatial metaphor of the "frontier"). In cultural terms, and with implicit reference to American cultural exports, this "border" stands for the common space where the cultural exchange takes place. It is a place of special hybridity, a space of transgression, of discursive negotiations which create cultural identities. This perspective is also in direct connection to the theoretical framework introduced by the "New Americanism", where the metaphor of the "frontier" and that of the "melting pot" (of an exceptionalist, unifying type) are replaced with the more flexible concepts of "borderland" and "contact zone", which facilitate a specific perception of Americanism.

One of these specific perceptions, made possible by the historical, ideological and economic context can be labeled by what Homi Bhabha called the fetishization of cultures. The fervent attachment to alien cultures and symbols is seen as an attempt to localize global symbols. The impossibility of physical mobility in another cultural space (because of ideological restrictions or economic difficulties) triggers this fetishization which has a substitutive role.

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[9] Vamyk Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships.* Norhtvale: J. Aronson, 1994.

[10] James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the late 20th Century.* Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1999.

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All of these possible ways of approaching Americanism are but a mere sample of the many possibilities which were made possible by the change of perspective that this field of knowledge has suffered lately. The lack of a unifying discourse has granted scholars with the enormous liberty of approaching the idea of Americanism in a manner which should suit their particular research interests. One of the major advantages of this type of approach is the accent on the reception of American culture, which can be a never-ending source of interpretations and perspectives.

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