Ce programme international est mené par une équipe franco-brésilienne de chercheurs en humanités, sciences sociales, arts et littérature. Il vise à la réalisation d'une plateforme numérique d'histoire culturelle transatlantique, éditée en quatre langues, pour analyser les dynamiques de l'espace atlantique et comprendre son rôle dans le processus de mondialisation contemporain. À travers une série d'essais consacrés aux relations culturelles entre l'Europe, l'Afrique et les Amériques, il met en œuvre une histoire connectée de l'espace atlantique depuis le XVIIIe siècle.

American Studies: the Cultural Branch of U.S. Empire?

Francisco Rodriguez-Jimenez - Extremadura

- Europe - Amérique du Nord
- L'espace atlantique dans la globalisation - La consolidation des cultures de masse

American Studies was meant to emancipate U.S. culture from its British tutelage. It became a tool of cultural diplomacy after World War II, at a time when "area studies" were supported by the U.S. government as part of the Cultural Cold War. Franco's Spain illustrates some of the limitations of this strategy.

> "*Heretofore Americans have come to Europe as students, whether as passionate pilgrims with Henry James, or more irreverently with Mark Twain as innocents abroad. But now we come not to study your culture, but bringing our own.*" [1]
>
> Francis O. Matthiessen, Salzburg Seminar, 1947.
>
> "*'American Studies' is taken to mean the efforts to build up a systematic knowledge and understanding of America and its civilization as a connected whole, particularly in those fields–human geography, history, politics, law, religion, language, and literature–which constitute a national culture.*" [2]
>
> Sigmund Skard, *The American Myth and the European Mind*, 1967.

The *American Studies* movement began in the United States around World War I, but its explicit use as a form of cultural outreach abroad was mainly a product of the Cold War. The U.S.-Soviet conflict was not limited to military and economic confrontation, but also involved an intense ideological and cultural rivalry, all such strategies falling under the category of the so-called "soft power." There were many, like U.S. historian and literary critic Francis O. Matthiessen, who did not want Americans to be "innocents abroad" any longer. Rather, they wanted to disseminate the nation's artistic creations and cultural production: they were intellectuals, businessmen, journalists, and university professors who traveled to the other side of the Atlantic as "missionaries" of Americanness, and champions of U.S. values, institutions, and beliefs.

They were many, but not as many as some Manichean versions of the Cold War are eager to portray. Not all of them were disciplined and submissive pawns of a well-oiled American cultural propaganda machine, nor were all of the projects for the teaching of English and U.S. culture abroad spearheads of imperialism, even if they were perceived as such in certain contexts. There was, on the contrary, room for disagreement as well as the clash of public and private interests.

This essay will briefly describe how this context affected the evolution of American Studies. Up to the late 1950s, U.S. cultural proselytism focused mainly on Western Europe, considered to be the hottest spot of the Cold War. Conversely, a similar form of "recruitment" took place in the Soviet camp, as Moscow used its intelligentsia to show the rest of the world the superiority of Soviet arts and letters in relation to the Americans'. Later on, targets and sources were diversified, in order to reach the so-called Global South. The geopolitical dynamics emerging from the Bandung Conference (1955) and the later independence of former European colonies, as well as the Cuban revolution (1959) were important turning points, which also prompted American

authorities and universities to develop other “area studies” as fields of expertise. In 1963, historian Louis Morton saw this evolution as a logical response to the “greatly increased obligations of the United States in international affairs,”[3] while John F. Kennedy’s foreign policy advisor McGeorge Bundy remarked that the Office of Strategic Service (OSS), precursor to the CIA, had actually proved to be “the first great center of area studies.”[4] For instance, the Cuban revolution was the occasion for Washington to “rediscover” Latin America, which in turn “stimulated the dramatic expansion of Latin American studies in North America over the next decade.”[5] In other words, cultural promotion of the U.S. and expertise on other nations’ cultures were developed as dual strategies entangled in geopolitical objectives. In this context, “American studies” was at times considered a weapon of mass persuasion.

This essay centers mainly on the period from the 1920s to the 1970s. It does so because that half-century is the period about which most of the research has been done to date, and also because the Vietnam War eroded the world image of the U.S., considered theretofore to be the champion of Western values of freedom and liberalism. Thus the evolution of American Studies from 1970 until the end of the Cold War was quite different from that of the previous period. In general terms, the first stage was one of consolidation, and government interference was more intense; the second was one of maturation and autonomy from governmental intervention. Our understanding of the second era (1970-91) is still more limited, and requires further research.

The Early Steps: from Harvard to Salzburg

Yale, Harvard, and George Washington University (GWU) were some of the universities which began, during the 1930s, to offer programs in American Studies, sometimes called “American Civilization” at the time. Like other pioneers in the field, Robert Bolwell–regarded as the “father” of American Studies at GWU–first specialized in British Studies before he ventured into the budding terrain of American Studies.[6] Bolwell became professor of American Literature in 1929, with hopes of developing it as an autonomous discipline, “not with just a course or two.” He strove to study American writers with the “same sort of critical analysis as had been applied to their English counterparts.”[7]

Before the Second World War, the number of teaching chairs in Europe devoted to American history or literature–the most significant subjects included under the label “American Studies”–was meager. The situation was not much brighter in the United States: few American universities were offering programs in American Studies before 1945. However, the outcome of World War II caused the paradigm to shift in the Western European bloc, albeit at a slower pace than expected by the American side. While the United States was consolidating its position as a superpower, interest in understanding and learning the nuances and peculiarities of its past, its art, its political system, and its economy was progressively increasing. Firstly, European citizens wanted to know more about the victorious Allied forces from the other side of the Atlantic. Secondly, their American counterparts, imbued with a patriotic sense of cultural nationalism, began to express more interest in the topic and endeavored to overcome popular European stereotypes and prejudices. In the realm of literature, scholars argued that the goal was to free the U.S. from its inferiority complex, as its literature was usually studied as an “appendage”[8] to the British tradition.

New demand served as an incentive for those who were supporting the American Studies movement. That interest did not, however, result in spectacular and rapid advance.[9] The evolution of this new discipline was anything but smooth, varying from country to country. At Harvard University, Francis O. Matthiessen and Perry E. Miller were among the pioneers involved in the new courses about America. These exceptional scholars developed an interdisciplinary approach to literary and historical studies in the 1930s, as witnessed by Leo Marx.[10] Yet from the very beginning, a rivalry emerged between the two men, due to antagonistic political views. On matters of American foreign policy, Miller was more of an aggressive “hawk” while Matthiessen could be labeled a “dove.” This division reflected the dilemma suffered by many intellectuals before and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 because, as Harvard philosopher Ralph Perry put it in August of that year, “we all have a sort of propaganda-phobia at the present time.”[11]

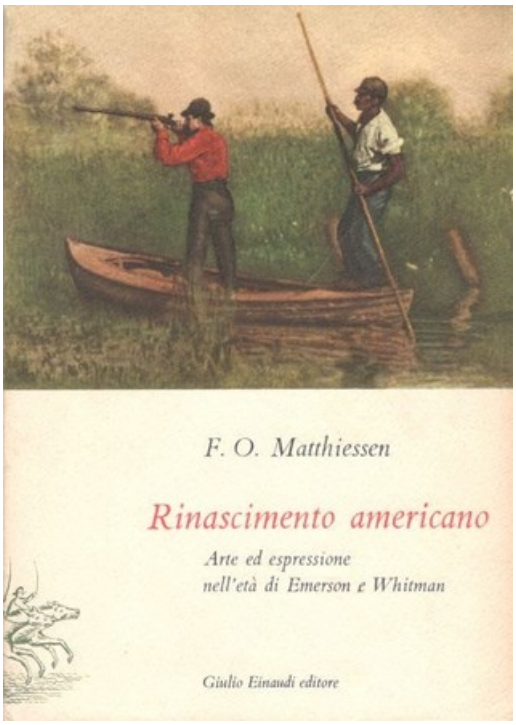
The awakening of a form of cultural-literary nationalism, which, as previously mentioned, inspired the first steps of the American Studies movement, reached its peak during World War II. In that context, scholars were perceived as vital assets “in the

guidance and mobilization of public opinion and in the determination of public policy." The promotion of American Studies overseas was understood to be a weapon in that struggle. A pamphlet was launched in June 1942 asking American citizens to contribute to the total war effort by showing greater appreciation for "U.S. cultural heritage" and "giving unselfish service to the country and its preservation."[12] This initiative to persuade American people of the relevance of their cultural legacy was meant to overcome a well-entrenched inferiority complex.

While some academics were uninterested in the war, Perry Miller was convinced from the very beginning that he needed to step forward, traveling up and down America's East Coast lecturing about American history, literature, and the Constitution. He then enrolled voluntarily and served in the army from June 1942 to December 1945. Soon after enlisting, he affirmed, "I am here to do what I can toward winning the war." He worked for the Office of Strategic Services composing brochures and pamphlets that celebrated the greatness of American democratic values while denouncing totalitarianism.[13]

Miller's dedication was no exception. A number of first-generation Americanist scholars had worked with intelligence and propaganda units, or were veterans from wartime in Europe, at a time when much urgency was felt for boosting America's image around the world. Norman Holmes, another pioneer of American Studies, and editor of *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature* (1938), also worked for the OSS and then for the CIA.

Yet not all were equally convinced and eager to obey that imperative. Francis O. Matthiessen, author of the widely praised *The American Renaissance* (1941), was a supporter of socialist and labor movements, a position that attracted the attention of McCarthyism and made him a target of inquiry. Such political harassment, together with the bullying which he reportedly suffered due to his homosexuality, has been proffered as the reason for his suicide in 1950.



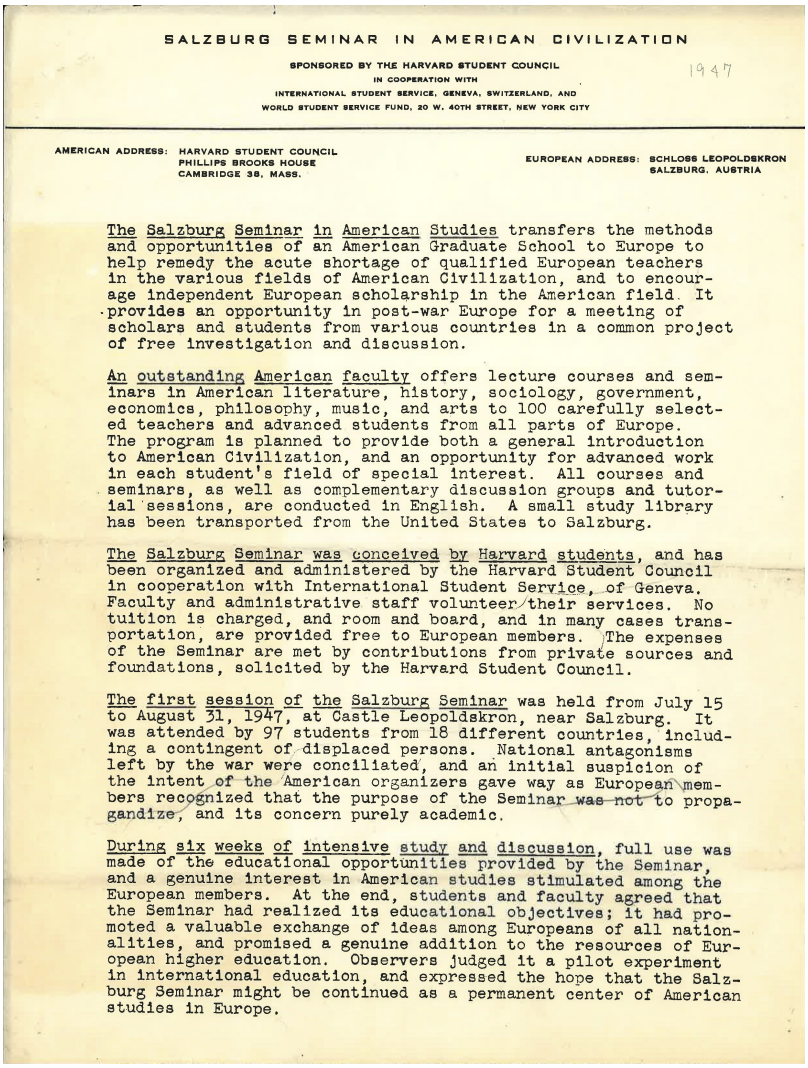
Francis O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* translated into Italian by Giulio Einaudi editore in 1954

Source : Goodreads

Apart from individual scholars and universities, philanthropic foundations such as Rockefeller, Ford, and the Carnegie Corporation–to name only the best-known–as well as learned societies, joined the effort to promote American Studies at home and abroad. To this end, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) encouraged the creation of the Committee on American Civilization (CAC) in 1947. This committee was probably the first ad hoc body to pursue the institutionalization of American Studies in university classrooms in the United States and abroad. It was not fortuitous that the establishment of that organization coincided with the onset of the Cold War. In March of that year, President Harry S. Truman delivered his famous Truman Doctrine speech to the U.S.

Congress. Part of it addressed the effort required from civil society as a whole, and some pioneers of American Studies seemed largely committed to the great responsibilities Truman mentioned. The makeup of the CAC's board is a good example of the philosophy driving the American Studies movement in that period. In its first year, it was composed of an assortment of professors from various fields–history, medicine, literature, sociology, and philosophy–its chairman being a member of the Russell Sage Foundation.[14] It was thus a community of common interests or "temporary symbiosis" that was also integrated by the U.S. diplomatic corps.

In the same year, the first Salzburg Seminar in American studies was held (July 15-31, 1947). Norwegian scholar Sigmund Skard defined this gathering in the Austrian city as a "spearhead" for the promotion of American Studies in European universities. He categorically stated that the seminar was only fueled by private interests and "avoided the political suspicions of skeptical Europe."[15] Following the same line of reasoning, another outstanding pioneer of American Studies, Henry Nash Smith, claimed that "the leaders of the seminar have earnestly tried to avoid close relations with government agencies [...] in order to guard against political pressures and the flavor of propaganda."[16]



SALZBURG SEMINAR IN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

SPONSORED BY THE HARVARD STUDENT COUNCIL
IN COOPERATION WITH
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICE, GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, AND
WORLD STUDENT SERVICE FUND, 20 W. 40TH STREET, NEW YORK CITY

1947

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EUROPEAN ADDRESS: SCHLOSS LEOPOLDSKRON
SALZBURG, AUSTRIA

The Salzburg Seminar in American Studies transfers the methods and opportunities of an American Graduate School to Europe to help remedy the acute shortage of qualified European teachers in the various fields of American Civilization, and to encourage independent European scholarship in the American field. It provides an opportunity in post-war Europe for a meeting of scholars and students from various countries in a common project of free investigation and discussion.

An outstanding American faculty offers lecture courses and seminars in American literature, history, sociology, government, economics, philosophy, music, and arts to 100 carefully selected teachers and advanced students from all parts of Europe. The program is planned to provide both a general introduction to American Civilization, and an opportunity for advanced work in each student's field of special interest. All courses and seminars, as well as complementary discussion groups and tutorial sessions, are conducted in English. A small study library has been transported from the United States to Salzburg.

The Salzburg Seminar was conceived by Harvard students, and has been organized and administered by the Harvard Student Council in cooperation with International Student Service, of Geneva. Faculty and administrative staff volunteer their services. No tuition is charged, and room and board, and in many cases transportation, are provided free to European members. The expenses of the Seminar are met by contributions from private sources and foundations, solicited by the Harvard Student Council.

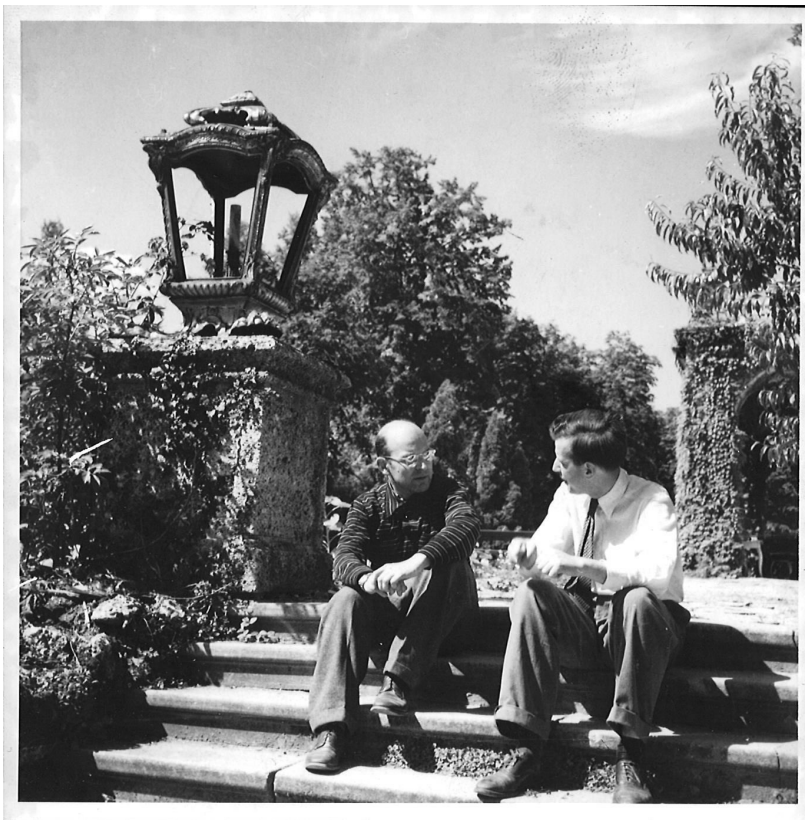
The first session of the Salzburg Seminar was held from July 15 to August 31, 1947, at Castle Leopoldskron, near Salzburg. It was attended by 97 students from 18 different countries, including a contingent of displaced persons. National antagonisms left by the war were conciliated, and an initial suspicion of the intent of the American organizers gave way as European members recognized that the purpose of the Seminar was not to propagandize, and its concern purely academic.

During six weeks of intensive study and discussion, full use was made of the educational opportunities provided by the Seminar, and a genuine interest in American studies stimulated among the European members. At the end, students and faculty agreed that the Seminar had realized its educational objectives; it had promoted a valuable exchange of ideas among Europeans of all nationalities, and promised a genuine addition to the resources of European higher education. Observers judged it a pilot experiment in international education, and expressed the hope that the Salzburg Seminar might be continued as a permanent center of American studies in Europe.

The first Salzburg Seminar in American studies (July 15-31, 1947)

Source : SalzburgGlobal

The above notwithstanding, the fact that the idea for that seminar emerged in February 1947, only a few weeks before the Truman Doctrine was launched, made it a difficult context for the noble, internationalist purposes its creators set forth. The so-called "Cultural Cold War" looming on the horizon proved to be a serious pitfall for the continuation of the seminar as a non-politicized venue. The early "innocence" of the initiative soon melted away under the pressure to win "hearts and minds," as President Eisenhower put it.[17] An example of that polarization lies in the fact that two of the colloquium's promoters, Clemens Heller and Francis O. Matthiessen, fell under suspicion of Communist activities during the McCarthy witch-hunt.



Two of the Salzburg Seminar co-founders at the inaugural meeting in 1947. Harvard scholar Francis Otto Matthiessen (1902-1950, left) coined the phrase "American Renaissance" for the literary movement that emerged around Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Austrian-born Clemens Heller (1917-2002) would later create Paris' Maison des Sciences de L'Homme with historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985).

Source : Salzburg Global Seminar

The U.S. Government’s Involvement Increases

By the late 1940s, the U.S. government began to look much more closely at what was happening inside the group of disciplines labeled “American Studies.” Until then, the impulse had mostly rested on private shoulders. In Washington circles, the idea began to grow that more public attention should be paid to this field and that the laissez-faire approach toward private initiatives was detrimental to national interests: it seemed convenient to enroll American Studies in the psychological and cultural contest against the Soviet Union.

The consolidation of the discipline turned out to be of special relevance for several reasons: first of all, because it could resolve Americans’ long-held feelings of cultural inferiority; and secondly, because it could contribute to erasing doubts about the strength of U.S. international leadership. As a consequence, the promotion and diffusion of American Studies became a deliberate strategy, implemented in the following years by American diplomacy in the context of the Cultural Cold War.

A good example of this new collaborative climate was the constitution of the American Studies Association in 1951. Among those involved were professors convinced of the need to improve the teaching of “Americanness,” philanthropic foundations ready to support the organization financially, and the U.S. government, with the Library of Congress providing logistical support. Generally speaking, the foundations and the universities willingly accepted their role as Cultural Cold Warriors. They were sharing with the American government a desire to prevail “through the minds of the men,” as Eisenhower emphasized in his “Atoms for Peace” speech on December 8, 1953.

With that objective, either on their own initiative or in coordination with the diplomatic corps, they adopted several strategies to promote American Studies abroad, most notably international conferences, seminars, and exhibitions. Numerous American corporations, and some European ones to a smaller degree, also joined the “mission,” shouldering part of the financing. Private funding allowed the U.S. diplomatic corps to insist that Washington’s intervention in public diplomacy was much more limited in

scope than Moscow's propaganda activities.

The venture met with difficulties nonetheless, with friction sometimes occurring among some of the governmental bodies responsible for carrying out the effort of obtaining greater space in the European classrooms for American Studies. For instance, the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the State Department found themselves locked in a territorial rivalry, and some confusion over their respective attributions and responsibilities arose. In 1955, the creation of an ad hoc commission, the State-USIA Joint Task Force, had only limited effects in resolving those misunderstandings.

Also, in the pressurized environment of the Cultural Cold War, these institutions were tempted to use the diffusion of American Studies abroad for propaganda. Some intellectuals felt uneasy about the government's interference in the realm of culture and education, while some others eagerly adopted the role of Cultural Cold warriors. The fervent and politicized atmosphere of the American-Soviet tension proved to be a challenging ground for those who were eager to defend the value of American Studies but did not want to sell blatant cultural propaganda abroad. The line was blurring.

A quick overview of the Spanish case

Spain offers a case in point. After the Second World War, the American military came to regard Spanish territory as an important strategic region in the event of a clash with the Soviet Union. At the same time, Spain's dictator General Francisco Franco urgently needed U.S. support in order to overcome the international ostracism caused by his previous "dangerous friendship" with Hitler and Mussolini. Thus, the Spanish-American agreement of 1953 can be seen as a "marriage of convenience." On the one hand, the United States received permission to build military bases in Spain. On the other, Franco obtained the long-desired "American embrace."

LA VANGUARDIA
BARCELONA
ESPAÑOLA
LA CONFERENCIA FRANCO-EISENHOWER EN EL PARDO
LA SALIDA DEL PRESIDENTE DE LOS EE. UU.

Frontpage of *La Vanguardia* on December 23, 1959. Eisenhower's visit to Madrid allowed Franco to celebrate and display "America's embrace."

Source : LaVanguardia

From the first moment, Washington's information services warned that a warm relationship with the Franco regime was needed–access to military installations depended on it–although it was unwise to drift too far away from the republican-democratic opposition either, as its role was likely to increase after the dictator was displaced. It was easy for U.S. officials to envision a future without Franco in power; it was more complicated to foresee where the Spanish people would go, whether toward Western European-style democracy or down a revolutionary path. Obviously, the United States was counting on the first option. Intending to contribute to this turn of events, one assessment written in 1965 succinctly summed up the goals of U.S. public

diplomacy and its educational component:

> In Spain, because of regime sensitivity to contacts with opposition, or even under certain circumstances with university students, United States Information Service diffuses this objective [evolutionary progress toward more democratic political processes] under the rubric, “American Studies,” covering our supporting informational and cultural activities across-the-board.[18]

However, the road was not free from obstacles. The anti-American feelings expressed by many Franquista personalities were quite intense in the first Franco regime (1936-1953). Shows of hostility and scorn against the United States were habitual, especially in sectors of the Spanish Catholic Church, the Army, and the fascist Falange–and not only on the left, as has been wrongly assumed until recently. The signing of the 1953 Military Agreements in Madrid did not completely change this attitude. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that these opinions remained in hibernation, at least for another decade or so. Indeed, anti-American feelings among right-wing politicians could be found right until the very end of the Franco regime.

Members of the anti-Franco opposition held even more bitter opinions toward the United States, which was beginning to be perceived as the dictator’s protector. Such perceptions were conjoined with acrimony dating as far back as the 1898 Spanish-American War. Stereotypes portrayed the United States as a young, materialistic nation, not keen on cultivating literature and the arts. The question floating in Spain’s academic circles was something like, “What can American Studies–especially the humanities–contribute to Spain, the cradle of brilliant artists, the motherland of the brave conquerors?” Spaniards were interested in U.S. scientific progress and technical development–far less in American culture.

Most of the time, U.S. cultural diplomacy operated without a sense of urgency in Spain. Franco’s friendship was perceived as steadfast and permanent. Consequently, the diverse cultural relations programs implemented by Public Affairs Officers–Fulbright included–were not as generously funded as those deployed in West Germany, France, Italy, or Great Britain, to mention but a few. The promotion of American Studies in Spanish classrooms reflected the difference. Also, it should be remembered that a substantial majority of these soft power strategies were developed in other countries as a part of the containment policy. In Spain, the threat of an extension of communism was already being watched, with unparalleled zeal, by Franco himself. Consequently, it seemed that Washington trod on the gas pedal of cultural promotion only at timely moments, specifically when it was perceived that the relationship with Franco’s Spain was entering a turbulent period. As a result, the Cultural Affairs Officers’ interest in promoting American Studies went through several ups and downs.

Other reasons for that situation are also specific to Spain. Among the most important ones was the difference of opinion between Spaniards and Americans with regard to which areas of knowledge should receive priority attention from the binational educational, scientific, and cultural exchange programs, and notably the Fulbright scholarships. Franquista educational authorities were hoping that the establishment of the program in 1958 would serve as a privileged channel to gain access to U.S. scientific and technological resources and know-how–in sum, as a way to develop valuable training for aeronautics, physics, chemistry, medicine, and electronics specialists, identified as fields where American research centers and universities were leading institutions in the world.

To a certain extent, these hopes ended up being frustrated, since the Fulbright program–inaugurated earlier in other countries–was attempting to prioritize exchanges in the humanities and social sciences. It was considered that these fields were likely to promote mutual understanding in a way that “hard sciences” such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc. did not. In addition, U.S. advances in the humanities and social sciences were less known and appreciated across the Atlantic. A good percentage of anti-American critique was precisely directed toward the supposed “cultural naïveté” of the United States.

Until the end of the 1960s, the progress of American Studies in Spanish curricula was rather deficient. Only the teaching of English, and some subjects largely dependent on trends and methods from American campuses, such as sociology and economics, seemed to take hold. In 1955-56, John Englekirk (Tulane University) was the first Fulbright professor to teach U.S. literature at the University of Madrid. In the following years, Barcelona, Salamanca and Zaragoza received some of his colleagues for one or

two courses, usually to complement their English curriculum. Ten years later, no coherent American Studies program existed anywhere, a situation which worried the Cultural Affairs Officers responsible for facilitating and intensifying educational and cultural relations with Madrid: "We believe that Spain must take a special effort in this field: for [...] it is considerably behind the other countries of Western Europe."[19] The advanced age of the dictator and the need to prepare for post-Francoism called for the strengthening of ties of empathy and mutual understanding with Spanish society, especially its universities. To this end, the promotion of American literature, history, and political science offered a kind of "soft appeal" that was not to be squandered.

Even with English teaching, progress was quite slow. According to a 1957 memo by a U.S. officer, a considerable number of the cultural programs implemented did not work properly, partly because of the "language skills barrier."[20] In addition, American English had a terrible reputation in those years. Those who were interested in learning English–there were few of them, because French was still dominant–usually preferred British English, which hardly contributed to the acceptance and consolidation of American Studies. Another obstacle to be overcome was the atmosphere of anti-Americanism existing in Western European societies since the 1920s, at least[21]–a perception that encouraged a broad repertoire of stereotypes and images of hostility toward the United States.

Last but not least, those who tried to introduce American Studies in the Spanish curriculum had to fight against the traditional rigidity of the educational system. There were some young scholars and professors eager to learn more about the sociocultural realities of the American nation, but, broadly speaking, they fought an uphill battle. Although they were interested in teaching and researching American literature, art, philosophy, or history, they were unable to change and reorient curricula. As a result, those who specialized in American Studies had serious difficulties getting permanent positions in Spanish universities. Available teaching chairs did not match their profiles which in turn caused the demand for studying these disciplines to remain low. Hence, the *Franquista* educational authorities did not have strong incentives to increase the offer; even if they had meant to do so, they would not have found qualified personnel to hire.

The combination of all the above-mentioned factors meant that the development of American Studies in the Spanish universities was stunted in the 1945-69 period. Consequently, these disciplines did not succeed as well as expected to spread America's image, warts and all, among the Spaniards.

An Impossible Mission?

> "I cannot concede that Americans have been neglectful of propaganda in the past, although it is possibly correct to say that we have neglected to propagandize the finer, noble essence of our civilization. But probably it is impossible to propagandize these elements. When propagandized, they lose their subtle essence."[22]
>
> Carlton Hayes, American ambassador in Spain, February 1944.
>
> "Through the encouragement of *American Studies* overseas, we have tried to stimulate leaders, scholars, teachers, writers and students to take American civilization seriously, to learn and teach more about us and about our past."[23]
>
> Walter Johnson, *American Studies Abroad*, 1963.
>
> "American Studies is unevenly developed around the globe, but systematically most developed according to U.S. international alliances [...] Differential development can be traced from university to university following occupation forces after World War II."[24]
>
> Richard Horwitz, *Exporting America: Essays on American Studies Abroad*, 1993.

Overall, there was never a strong consensus about the need to promote American Studies abroad or the best way to do so, either within the American foreign-policy machinery or within the realm of U.S. academia. On the contrary, contradictions and internal friction continued, with various degrees of intensity in all the periods examined here.

Some officials, especially the Cultural Affairs Officers (CAOs) or the so-called "culturalists," refrained from exploiting American Studies for blatant propagandist goals. They were convinced that such a short-term strategy would ultimately fail and probably trigger a boomerang effect. Yet, others were determined to use the diffusion of those disciplines overseas as “weapons of mass persuasion” in the Cultural Cold War. A third group, enthusiastic devotees of a hardline, power-oriented foreign policy, considered that these cultural diplomacy actions were mostly a waste of time and resources.

Another lingering handicap was the inferiority complex suffered by some U.S. citizens when they compared their literature, art, and history with that of Europe.[25] Scathing European stereotypes regarding the supposed cultural inferiority of the American nation proved enduring. The American people were characterized as young nation, uncouth and perpetually inexpert and ignorant in the realm of the fine arts and humanities, while American military and economic supremacy was readily acknowledged.

Thus, the action-reaction effect that was hoped for from the diffusion of American Studies abroad, in terms of projecting a positive international image of the United States, did not work seamlessly, nor was it without contradictions. Some of the projects directed at promoting and consolidating acceptance of American Studies in European universities were somewhat naïve: it was thought that greater exposure to American high culture would immediately lead to higher esteem for American arts and letters, and consequently bring about a more positive appreciation of the United States. Experience proved the truth of the old saying, supposedly uttered by Einstein, that it is easier to disintegrate an atom than a prejudice. Likewise, U.S. officials may have underestimated the fact that although cultural influence can be a form of power, it is not easily controllable, and its use to achieve propagandistic purposes may even fire back.

American Studies, as an interdisciplinary academic subject destined to define and to project “Americanness” in European university classrooms, had to confront more than a few adversities. One in particular is that it did not manage to avoid being tagged a by-product of British culture. The rigidity of most continental institutions of higher education curricula did not help in this respect.

As a weapon of mass persuasion directed at the European Western bloc, the American Studies movement enjoyed only mitigated success, and a qualified assessment remains dependent on ongoing research, and further analysis of the situation in each European countries. On American soil, meanwhile, the American Studies movement had already prospered and secured an influential position within the American educational system by the late 1950s. The hectic and turbulent 1960s put into question some of the methodological and thematic principles of the field. Even so, the challenge was apparently met, because in successive years the number of American Studies programs offered in U.S. universities rather increased. In European universities there was likewise a growing number of American Studies programs incorporated in curricula, although at a slower rate. That sluggish pace cannot be attributed to lack of interest in promoting them by U.S. cultural diplomacy: in a 1965 report, U.S. diplomats still described the promotion of American Studies abroad as “the cornerstone of American cultural diplomacy in Western Europe.”[26]

As mentioned earlier, the Vietnam War is considered to have been a turning point. The anti-Americanism expressed by a significant percentage of European citizens grew as a result of Washington’s tempestuous meddling in that conflict. What happened in the different scenarios from the early ’70s to the end of the Cold War requires further research. Hopefully, this short essay will serve as an incentive, a starting point for a needed, more comprehensive account of the story of American Studies abroad.

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Auteur

- Francisco Rodriguez-Jimenez - Extremadura

  Francisco RODRÍGUEZ-JIMÉNEZ obtained his Ph. D. in 2009 from the University of Salamanca. He went on to work as a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard University and as a Fulbrighter at GWU. Currently, he is a professor at the University of Extremadura, and a member of the Global Studies-USAL project. He has likewise acted as international reviewer for the European Research Agency; and he writes regularly OP-Eds in EL MUNDO.