American Studies in Tehran

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It’s Friday in February in downtown Tehran. I’m taking advantage of the day off from the seminar I’m teaching to catch up with unfinished work from home. I feel guilty to be spending a few hours secluded away, when it was so difficult to get the visa to come here. The windows in my apartment are closed; it has been chilly and damp with the occasional dusting of snow. For the past few minutes I can hear the muffled tones of midday prayers across the street on the campus of the University of Tehran. My Persian isn’t good enough yet to understand the sermon, but I can pick out a number of words that I know from Arabic. Estiqbal, enqolab. Independence, revolution. Israel several times. These are difficult times in Tehran, with UN deadlines expiring, aggressive talk coming from the United States, and President Ahmadinejad ever strengthening his resolve to push forward the nation’s nuclear program. “Like a train without brakes or reverse gear,” he announces, and the phrase makes it into papers around the world (February 25, 2007). “They need a stop button,” Condoleezza Rice retorts. From here the word “button” sounds ominous, perhaps a reference to the United States’s own nuclear power. About a week ago (February 19), the USS John C. Stennis pulled into the Gulf of Oman to remind Iran that “all options are on the table,” as U.S. Democrats and Republicans alike keep saying publicly. Rumors run through the city that an American attack is imminent. “The Japanese embassy has announced that the U.S. will attack Tehran this evening,” goes one. The students speak of psychological terrorism. Finally, I know what they mean.

The cleric giving the sermon is hitting his stride. His voice gets faster and louder. I move to the window, open it, and stick my head out to listen. The crescendo is exhilarating and intimidating. It builds and builds and then gives way to that shockingly familiar but ever foreign chant: Marg bar Amrika! Marg bar Amrika! (Death to America!) I feel the chill of danger tingle across my skin. The speaker has his public fully with him; it joins in. The anxiety provoked by the roar
The sounds of the service are getting faint. The park is pleasant, despite the chill. Families are out. A father and his teenaged daughter are playing badminton without a net. She is good. Smaller kids run around the playground. A young boy climbs a ladder into the hatch of a faux army helicopter, then slides down out its mouth. In spite of the military play structure, life in the park does not seem that different in Tehran from Chicago. I do a big circle, then make my way back to the edge of the park and stop in one of the shops at the southwest corner. A year ago, in this same shop, I found several books by Tony Robbins, the American motivational guru, in Persian translation. Today my eye is caught by giant Shrek books, 2’ by 3’ illustrated softcovers, retelling the animated DreamWorks film and
its sequel in both Persian and grammatically suspect English. I buy the two Shrek books for my kids and head back. People are spilling out of campus. My street is open again.

Sixteen Azar Street is named to commemorate the date in 1953 when three students of the Tudeh (communist) party were killed by the Shah’s police. The students were protesting Vice President Nixon’s trip to Iran, less than four months after the CIA-sponsored overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected hero who had made the geopolitical mistake of nationalizing the Iranian oil fields. When Nixon came to Tehran in a show of solidarity with the shaky Shah, the students threw stones at his car from the rooftops of university buildings. The day, December 7 on the Western calendar, is called “Students’ Day.” I walk down 16 Azar, holding my two giant Shrek portfolios. I pass a hamburger shop, a cyber café, a tailor, and a bookshop before heading down the alley where my apartment is located.

The next day, Saturday, is the beginning of the new week. The University of Tehran is given back to the university for the business of education, and I’m back in class for the fourth meeting of my seminar.

It is my second trip to Iran in the last fourteen months. I am the guest of the Institute of North American and European Studies, where I am teaching a two-week graduate seminar on research methodologies in American studies. Many intellectuals in Tehran don’t know of the Institute yet, even some who teach at the University of Tehran. The Institute occupies its own small building in central Tehran, across Laleh Park from the main campus. Created in 2005, the Institute launched its first degree program in early 2006. There are already two cohorts of MA students working their way through four semesters of course work. By fall 2007, a third cohort will have started the sequence.

The idea of my coming to teach at the Institute emerged in December 2005, when I gave several lectures in Tehran (on globalization and culture, diaspora, American literature, U.S. Orientalism) at both the School of Humanities and the School of Social Sciences. My hosts were the two key men in the new Institute. One, a social scientist, had done work on Muslim communities in the United Kingdom and on globalization and urbanism. The second, a literature specialist with a PhD from England and a dissertation on British literary Orientalism, would be his deputy. Despite his training in British literature, the latter had the advantage of having grown up in Ohio until 1979, when his father, a prominent physician, wanted to join the revolutionary project. This deputy, M——, is almost exactly
my age (I was born in 1968), and our points of reference growing up in the United States cross over in many ways. We reminisce about Wacky Packs, old Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup commercials, and the lineup of the Cincinnati Reds of the late 1970s. Both he and his boss are seyyeds, that is, people who can trace their lineage back to the Prophet. Both are charismatic, though differently. When the director, who wears his clerical robes and turban on campus, speaks to me in his calm and yet passionate way about what he calls a “culture of peace,” I feel as if I am in the presence of a kindly Catholic priest. In between frequent interruptions by students and his cell phone, he discusses the difference between a “culture of peace” and a “culture of war” and how, ironically enough, the United States is much more effective in making its case to Iranians within a “culture of peace.” With his deputy, who wears a suit and button down shirt to campus and does not cover his head, I feel somehow less at a remove, despite his unsparing critique of the confluence of Western hegemony, media, and academia. It’s his wisecracking humor and pop cultural references that put us in the same universe.

When I was here last, the Institute was an idea that had started to be a reality. These men had persuaded the chancellor of the university to fund a center for studying the United States (Canada and Western Europe were part of the larger plan, but clearly lag behind in implementation). Given the importance of the United States, they argued, Iran could not afford to be without its own academic expertise on American history and society. A center dedicated to North America could train young men and women who could move on to jobs in government, academia, and civil society with an understanding of that country whose force, both political and cultural, was undeniable. Then they won the internal debate that the “culture people” were better suited to create such a center than the political scientists, who wanted to pursue an area studies model. They argued for interdisciplinarity as a greater means to understanding. After the election of former Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in June 2005, the university community held its collective breath to see which way the wind would blow. Ahmadinejad would replace the chancellor of course, but he was not able to get his man in the post. The man he did appoint to lead the university did not cancel the plans to fund the new Institute for North American and European Studies. They still had funding.

What they didn’t have was anybody, save a couple of people who had trained or lived in the United States, to teach the courses. M——, the deputy, traveled to the United States (the director’s visa was denied). M—— met with the representatives of prominent Middle East studies programs on the East Coast. But they, with their own faculty and programs under siege in the post-9/11 era as
overly sympathetic to their object of study, didn’t quite know who in American studies to recommend. He met with people in American studies at universities in New York and D.C., but they couldn’t figure out who would be interested in going to Iran. He learned quickly something that surprised him, but shouldn’t have: that American studies programs and Middle East studies programs in the United States are entities that rarely meet. And while you might find some Middle East studies faculty who would come to the University of Tehran, it is difficult to convince most Americanists to travel outside the United States to develop their own understanding of their field and where it is going.

Still, this deputy director made enough of an impression, apparently, that someone suggested to the leadership of the American Studies Association (ASA) that the organization invite him to attend the annual meeting that year in Washington, D.C., all expenses paid. The ASA paid for him to come and gave him a free registration and money for a hotel, and it didn’t ask him to do anything other than roam the corridors of those opulent hotels. The invitation was meant, of course, as an effort to break out of the exceptionalism of the ASA and, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as an effort to engage more directly with the Middle East and its scholars. There were, however, neocolonial overtones in inviting a person, who in the French colonial period would have been called an évoluté, to the imperial center to stroll the hallways and stay at its own expense at a hotel that cost $200 a night (the discounted conference rate), when the salary of a deputy director of an institute was something like $1,000 a month. More to the point, the topics that this director found himself learning about, as he made his way through the hallways of this grand hotel, were so esoteric as to be of no help to him in planning how to teach himself American studies so that he could teach his students. He would stay for a few moments at each panel, trying to relate it to the needs of the institute he was building back home, before he staggered on to the next.

The ASA is a decidedly left-leaning organization, and the overwhelming majority of American studies scholars would hardly think of their participation in an ASA meeting in Washington, D.C., as pertaining to an imperial project. When the ASA takes its turn in D.C., I feel a more concerted attempt to “talk truth to power” and a more profound sense at times how futile that is. Indeed it was not long before the meeting in question that the putatively “liberal” New Republic attacked the scholars associated with the cutting edge of the American Studies Association as what the writer, Alan Wolfe, called “anti-American studies” (February 2003). Wolfe would have loved the detail of the Iranian being invited to the ASA, and surely would have used it as an example of the perfidy and double
dealing of the so-called new American studies. But to the Iranian scholar, feeling increasingly out of his element, the obsessions of American studies scholars on the minutiae of their history and the idea that he might be able to relate to that scholarship were hardly anti-American or antagonistic to the U.S. state. Rather, what he heard as he drifted in and out of sessions was from his perspective so thoroughly caught up in the ideology of American exceptionalism as to be untranslatable outside the United States. Nonetheless, he continued to approach American scholars, with considerable charm and persistence, and ask them to come teach for a couple of weeks at his institute.

When I was in Tehran a month later, coming to the Institute by a completely different route, a textbook arrived and an anthology, donations of extra desk copies from two American scholars. He was appreciative.

The past several years have seen a small boom in the creation and development of American studies programs in North Africa and the Middle East. Some programs have benefited from funds or personnel supplied indirectly by the U.S. State Department (such as via the Fulbright Program) and some have formal affiliations with U.S. institutions. But many of the most interesting programs, such as the one in Tehran, have been initiated fully outside the directives of the United States. Not surprisingly, there are starkly different conceptions of what “American studies” might mean. This was evident at a meeting I attended in Beirut just before Christmas 2005, on my way back from Tehran, held at the newly endowed Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud Center for American Studies at the American University of Beirut. Participants from American studies programs in a dozen countries in the Middle East struggled with the question of how to manage local perceptions of the United States, their own political anger at the Bush administration, and traditions (or the lack of them) of Americanist scholarship in the region.

Since 2005, I have been visiting and sometimes teaching short seminars at American studies programs in six countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The trajectories are as different as the histories of those cities and countries. In some places, these programs call themselves “American studies,” but in others they do not, often for strategic reasons. None of them is in any real dialogue with American scholars of the field, nor do they necessarily want to be, as those exchanges are often essentializing (such as when the Arab scholars come to the United States on the Fulbright’s new exchange called Direct Access
to the Muslim World), or the trips end up offering little practical guidance for their projects back home.

For several years, some U.S.-based scholars of American studies have decried their discipline’s inability to think comparatively or internationally. A prevailing concern at least since Amy Kaplan’s introduction to the landmark collection of 1993, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, has been to critique the exceptionalist tendencies in the study of American history, literature, and culture, or as Kaplan put it, the “absence of empire” in American studies. One encouraging result has been the development of so-called hemispheric approaches, which has been leading the way within American studies in thinking about the relationship of geopolitics to national cultures and engaging with subfields such as border studies. As American studies itself circulates beyond the hemisphere, though, in these days when “empire” seems not to be a bad word in the press (even if increasingly tainted), and when circulation is considered in the myriad ways that *Public Culture* has been pursuing since its founding, how might we understand something like American studies in Tehran?

In Tehran something quite different is happening than the expansion of an exceptionalist model. The British scholar Paul Giles has described that model as the “magic circle between text and context.” Its seductive power and thus its persistence, Giles argues, has been to “hold in suspension those conditions whereby the progressivist formulas of American studies would—naturally, as it were—underwrite a rhetoric of emancipation.”¹ The Tehran institute has its shortcomings, to be sure. But it has broken that magic circle. Whatever else the Tehran “Americanists” have to contribute to scholarly discussions within American studies, that break—that interruption—should be of some interest to the field at large.

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In the seminar room, we are discussing *Casablanca*. For A——, it clearly represents the beginning of American internationalism, when America thought it could sit there at the center of things and tell everyone what to do, turn a blind eye to corruption, as Rick does in the Café Americain. A—— says this from across the seminar table and looks a bit resigned. She is wearing a beret over her hijab, and her jeans and combat boots suggest an individualistic, “alternative” perspective.

But here, nearly all the class agrees with her. I am trying to provoke a discussion and almost plead for dissent. Finally, B——, who is dressed more conservatively, without a strand of hair showing (and a white wimple under her black hijab that reminds me of a nun who taught my Sunday school class for years), raises her hand. She sees it differently. For her, *Casablanca* is a beautiful love story and universal in its appeal. But hers is a lone voice. A third student, a woman, C——, turns the discussion to the recent film *Babel*. Now several hands shoot up. Across the board, the students object to *Babel* as the pinnacle of Islamophobia. I admit to them I hadn’t yet seen it. When I left home, it was in my online rental queue, still awaiting its release on DVD. One young woman promises me a copy tomorrow. I beat her to it. That evening, I pick up high-quality copies of *Babel*, along with *Borat, The Good Shepherd*, and the latest Bond film, all of which are still in the theaters back in the United States. I pay about $2 for each. The students tell me that I got ripped off. Next time, I go to Haft-e Teer Square for my DVDs and pick up all the contenders for this year’s Academy Awards for $1 each.

After class, I mention the *Marg bar Amrika* incident to a couple of the students with whom I have started to develop a rapport and tell them the account I have started with here in a joking, insiderish way. We are sitting in a café called Godot on Enqalab Street in central Tehran. From my experience elsewhere in the Middle East, I expect them to apologize, to be embarrassed. Not at all. One, D——, jumps in quickly. “But you call us the ‘Axis of Evil,’” she says. “Why should we mind it if people call you *Shaytan-e Bozorg* [Great Satan] or say ‘*Marg bar Amrika*’?” Hamid Dabashi has written recently that Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech was perhaps the “second most damaging thing the United States has done against the cause of democracy in Iran.”\(^2\) (The first was the overthrow of Mossadegh.) “Don’t you realize,” I say, “that rejection of President Bush’s rhetoric is a rallying call around which Americans define themselves as oppositional?” No one is convinced. The conversation takes many turns, some predictable, others not. What the students perceive and misperceive about American culture, however, is always interesting and at times, dare I say, profound. And how could it be otherwise?

As I look at the assignments these students have written before my arrival and the topics that they propose for their master’s theses, the strong influence of present concerns clearly orients their interest in U.S. history and culture. This is not necessarily a problem. Why should they study American culture and history the way Americans do? Whether these students trace religious imagery in American

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presidential rhetoric, Islamophobia in contemporary Hollywood, or public diplomacy and “soft power,” and whether the texts they draw on are from the Internet, donated desk copies of U.S. history textbooks, or books from the impressive library the Institute has been building on its own, the students’ hunger to understand American society seems to emerge from a sense of despair at the disconnect between their projects, pursued passionately, and the object they are studying, which has little regard—in both senses of the word—for them. As they look at American media, whether it be CNN or rebroadcasts of Jon Stewart, or the oppositional Persian language programs beamed in from the Iranian diaspora in L.A.’s “Tehrangeles,” or as they listen to American political rhetoric or watch Hollywood films, they are struck by what seems to them a fundamental misunderstanding of Iran and an imperial arrogance on the part of Americans. Their disconnect—and the trade sanctions that are the major source of that separation—clearly inhibits their ability to contextualize or fill in their understanding of many aspects of U.S. history and society. Nonetheless, they have the ability to see through the lenses of ideology that shield many Americans (myself included) from perceiving the collusion of, say, CNN, the liberal Hollywood that makes films such as Babel or 300, and the Bush administration. But they also are often blocked from fuller comprehension of American society by some of these presentist concerns.

There is in Tehran, it becomes apparent, no innocent way to approach America as an object of study. As opposed to the famous American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad, India, for example, which I visited in late 2006 and where for nearly four decades Indian scholars of American literature, history, sociology, and politics built an impressive tradition of academic expertise on the United States on their own ground, in Iran there is neither a tradition of American studies scholarship nor the ability yet to create one dispassionately. There is no uncontaminated starting point. The present is overdetermined. It cannot be easily undone. Just as 16 Azar Street, the street where I am staying, names “Students’ Day” via an always already oppositional relation to the United States, the engagement with American history and culture is from the start marked. Whether or not this is the ideal way to break what Giles derided as the magic circle inhibiting American studies is ultimately irrelevant. But, in Tehran, broken it is.

What the experience of engaging with American studies in Tehran suggests, then, is that the archive of American studies itself has to be radically reconfigured for the field to be relevant in the twenty-first century. The way American history, literature, and society is perceived, interpreted, and reconfigured outside the United States, and the problems and possibilities that emerge from engagement with those who bring an outsider’s regard to the trajectory of the United States,
must be considered by the field at large. In order to understand this, not only will comparative, multilingual American studies work be a prerequisite. So too will the circulation of scholars of “America” along multiple pathways be necessary. And though it will require scholars of all nationalities at times to stagger around looking for common ground, as our Iranian colleague did at the ASA in D.C., and as I did during Friday prayers in Tehran under the threat of U.S. attack, doing so may lead to a greater future for a field in need of one.