

This document contains a text presented at the conference *Academic Demarcations: Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity*, 13-14 September 2012 at the University of Oslo, **and may only be quoted after informing the author:**

Ida Jahr - idajahr@zedat.fu-berlin.de

## Interdisciplinarity in American Studies.

Ida Jahr

(First I want to give you a short preamble on what my dissertation is about. It is about the intellectual and institutional and personal factors but also the intellectual' institutional and personal narratives that come into play in the creation of a new area of knowledge, in my case, through the lens of Sigmund Skard, who was the first professor of American literature in Norway. In addition it therefore also touches upon Norwegian national identity and a move from a German to an American intellectual and cultural sphere of influence.)

I want to start with three little amputated stories of scholars talking about other scholars. The first one is really just a quote, Immanuel Wallerstein quoting Gunnar Myrdal, from the end of Myrdal's career. According to Wallerstein, Myrdal said in 1987 that he had always wondered “why the psychologists and philosophers have left the economists alone and undisturbed in their futile exercise.”<sup>i</sup> Above and beyond the little kick that this gives those of us who have been taught to despise economists as dreamers with no connection to reality, this quote is interesting also for the use it is being put to by Wallerstein. He is trying to find the Myrdal Legacy, and concludes that the Myrdal legacy for social science is not the answers he came up with when studying America, but the types of questions that he asked.

The second little story snippet comes from Thomas Kuhn, who originally came from the natural sciences into history of science. He was given a fellowship at the 'Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences' to have time to write on what was to become *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and he narrates in his introduction that when he came there in 1958, he was “struck by the number and extent of the overt disagreements between social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods”<sup>ii</sup> and that this interdisciplinary encounter was actually what made him come up with his paradigms theory in the first place.

The last of my little story snippets moves us finally into American Studies. Leo Marx, who is one of the founders of the so-called Myth-and-Symbol school of American Studies in the 50s and 60s tells this story in several articles. He recounts Richard Hoggart, founder of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, trying to get a young American Studies visiting Fulbrighter in England to “explain what American Studies was all about.”<sup>iii</sup> Hoggart was having trouble understanding the difference between American Studies and other literary or cultural studies, and kept asking – but isn’t that cultural studies – but what is the difference between that and English literature, and in the end the young visiting Fulbrighter exclaimed in exasperation: “But you don’t understand, I believe in America!”<sup>iv</sup>

The first of these stories speaks to the stated purpose of interdisciplinary studies – relevance to the wider world – interdisciplinarity as an attempt to get out of the narrow-mindedness of disciplinary work. The second one speaks to the fact that, as Stanley Fish *actually* said, misquoted in your call for papers: “Being Interdisciplinary is So Very Hard to Do.” Kuhn was speaking of social sciences – I have written elsewhere that I am glad he didn’t come to an American Studies conference. The third story is a comment on the political nature of scholarship in general, but also of American studies in particular. And that needs explanation.

As a beginning I want to quote the Ford Foundation internal report on 'American Studies Abroad' from 1970:

The American Studies “field” has suffered from the vagueness and uncertainties which have been faced by others, including area studies programs in European Studies, Atlantic Studies, etc. In general the period of sharp warfare over the meaning of American Studies has largely passed both in the United States and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, there are continuing academic discussions in a less shrill tone of the distinctions to be drawn between American Studies (capital letters), American studies

(small letters), American civilization, and American culture. American Studies have been discussed on occasion as involving a study of American culture or sub-cultures, as a philosophic enquiry, as an interdisciplinary marriage of literature, history, law and the social sciences, and as a cooperative effort to deal with problems characterized by their “Americanness,” as an “intellectual process,” and as a discipline marked by cooperative arrangements.<sup>v</sup>

They continue on to say that the easiest thing is actually to “agree with Sigmund Skard” in his definition and then they quote that. Skard, who was the first professor of American literature in Norway, but also instrumental in the institutionalization of American Studies in Europe in general, says that

by American Studies is meant ‘the study of the Civilization, past and present, of the United States of America, principally the study of those aspects that are fundamental to all national civilizations: human and cultural geography, political, economic, social, religious, and intellectual developments, laws and institutions, language, literature and the arts’ with ‘particular importance ... attributed to literature.’<sup>vi</sup>

Now this is a very broad, and quite problematic, definition of any scholarly field. But it is also interesting in that it adds any methodological concerns on as an after-though – “particular emphasis attributed to literature.” In the U.S. at the time American Studies was trying to read *The American Mind* out of American literature. Skard’s definition is only understandable through the history of the field itself, and through the intention behind Skard’s writing the book in which this definition features. What was he trying to achieve by that particular definition? Among other things, he was trying to achieve a justification for a field already being funded.

As such, it is significant that it is the Ford Foundation’s report and definition I used, though I could also have used the Rockefeller Foundation’s report. But that report was actually *written*

by Sigmund Skard himself. Both these foundations were heavily invested in the development of American Studies in Europe. And American Studies as a field was deeply entwined with European-American relations after WWII.

In an article pointing this out, the historian Philip Gleason, recounts what he calls the ‘folk history of American Studies’:

The movement had its beginnings in the 1920s with scattered efforts among professors of literature and history to develop an integrated approach to the study of the national culture; it took on more formal shape in the 1930s with the establishment of the first degree programs in American Civilization at Harvard, Yale, and Pennsylvania; and it expanded rapidly in the next decade by a natural process of growth, with the launching of *American Quarterly* (1949) and the founding of the American Studies Association (1951) being the culminating landmarks of its maturation.<sup>vii</sup>

In contrast to this Gleason pointed out the field’s roots in WWII and in post-WWII international cooperation. The war reinforced “tendencies toward cultural nationalism” both in the U.S. and in Europe, it reinforced the “ideological dimension of American identity” – American exceptionalism – and it “forged a link between the democratic ideology and the idea of culture that became central to the American Studies approach.”<sup>viii</sup>

What this folk history of the movement and Gleason’s focus doesn’t necessarily make explicit is the precondition of internationality itself for the rise of American Studies. The first issue of *American Quarterly* was a report on the Salzburg American Summer School, with papers by European and American scholars. The creation of an *American literature* was necessary to show *the world* that America too had a high culture, and not just money - in effect including America in those who get to be studied with 19<sup>th</sup> century sociological methods rather than philological-Orientalist or anthropological method: in Civilization - which was also the name of the first American studies programs.

One can imagine an alternative folk history of American Studies: WWII left America as the only economy not devastated by war. A perceived need to reeducate Germans in particular, but Europeans in general, towards a more democratic culture, together with a need to rebuild European academia, led the large American foundations to fund cooperation between American and European scholars that resulted in an interdisciplinary study based in a national culture ideal and the creation of an idealized and/or dystopian ‘America’ as standing in for forces of modernity – placing America in the future.

The way Marx tells the story of early American Studies, the encounter between Hoggart and a young American Fulbrighter is proof that “Somewhere back of the American Studies idea there once lurked an amorphous conception of the United States as the embodiment of a social ideal.”<sup>ix</sup> The German Americanist Winfried Fluck gave a speech here at the University of Oslo during the 2008 European Association of American Studies conference where he argued that American Studies in Europe continuously relate to America as an object of Romance – the continuous deferment of gratification.<sup>x</sup> I want to add to this that American Studies, through its institutionalization and structures of institutional justification, by necessity places America in the future. We still study America as if it’s something that is going to happen to us. The question is only whether we see this future as a good thing or a bad thing.

When it comes to the practical institutionalization of interdisciplinary studies, that has been implemented in very different ways in different countries and as I wrote in my abstract was both incidental and dependant upon funding structures. Here in Norway, American Studies has usually been institutionalized within the English language departments, and the infighting there has had a large impact on how the field looks today. In Berlin there is a different structure with a mini or mock liberal arts college as one of the institute around which the Freie Universitet was built up, funded because it is Berlin, of course.

Sigmund Skard was given money by the Rockefeller Foundation to go to the U.S. and study with Americanists there in 1947/48. It is actually widely reported as being a precondition for him saying yes to the job of being Norway's first professor of American literature. He followed classes by the large names in American studies and took notes. One of the things that interested him was the interdisciplinarity of the field and therefore it's ability to have an impact on political developments in the wider world. In notes from a class by Robert Spiller, funding kingpin and later ASA president, Skard reports that Spiller criticizes another scholar for going through American literature "on German foundations (Spiller found the system expressed in the word 'Grundriss'!)"<sup>xii</sup> According to Spiller, and Skard's notes from Spiller, "American scholarship [Skard uses the Norwegian *vitskap* or *vitenskap*, comparable to German *Wissenschaft*] was never 'temperamentally suited' for German method, German 'accuracy and objectivity.'"<sup>xiii</sup>

But Skard also noted that Spiller took his time explaining these things –that he had plenty of time and the students had plenty of time – He wrote in his notes "They also have the money!"<sup>xiii</sup> Implicitly, Skard argues that there is a difference between American and Norwegian students, and that American methods cannot be wholesale brought to Norwegian academia. He also commented on this in his memoir later that an interdisciplinary study in Norway would never have worked, as there was no student base – the students would have perhaps a teacher or two, perhaps some journalists, but mainly dilettantes.<sup>xiv</sup> Recent writers on American studies has pointed out that the early American Studies scholars, when looking for "The American Mind," very easily could imagine that there was such a thing because the environment in which they worked and moved was very homogenous – a small and uniform milieu.<sup>xv</sup> Yes, that is the case – they, including Skard, are in general part of the same networks – but the international dimension from the very beginning introduced an unstableness to the field. There is not just a geography of American studies but a geopolitics of American

Studies, too.<sup>xvi</sup> European Americanists have their libidos formed in the U.S., as Liam Kennedy has framed it – both institutionally, (through funding) culturally and intellectually – we all want to be published by *American Quarterly*. Within the U.S., American Studies departments offer their students a lesson in modern American citizenship, constantly renegotiating American collective identity and memory. That of course is not what American Studies is being used for outside of the U.S. Often it shows up as echoes in interdisciplinary context for the study of American literature, not fully integrated into the model of the study of the *American mind* through its high literature. Other conceptions are as background knowledge for language acquisition, or an integrated social history approach to American history.

The author of the Ford Foundation report in 1970 was very wrong when he wrote that the wars over American Studies methods were over by then. The presidential addresses of the American Studies Association still garner controversy, perhaps especially the ones that touch upon the unstableness that lies in the overlap between American Studies in and outside of the U.S. The roar when one former president had the gall to suggest a name change of the organization a few years ago could be heard clear across the Atlantic.

The history of American Studies shows a few things. (1.) That interdisciplinary endeavors are unstable, perhaps especially because they are not founded in what Wallerstein claims is the legacy of Arne Myrdal's work on America – the type of questions we ask – in methodology. This is especially the case for interdisciplinary endeavors that are organized around geography. (2.) In addition, these endeavors are never *only* organized around geography. There slips into the mix questions of desire, of scholars' wish for prestige. (3.) There is a marked difference between the universal (or international goals) of scholarship and the national goals of scholarship. The Ford Foundation report also distinguishes between what they call scholarly and national goals – the national goals for them being

...an increased awareness of the premises and factors of group action, more intelligent appraisal and predictability of national actions, a broader base for decision-making by trained persons tending towards better international understanding, and the humanizing of international relations in a stable and prosperous world.<sup>xvii</sup>

Their definition of a national goal, reflecting their need to justify their expenditure to superiors, is much too narrow. The search for truth is never not founded in an institutional and funding structure, which guides the kinds of questions asked and therefore also the kind of knowledge we can find, but often this can also be the result of historical coincidence.

- "American Studies Abroad, with Particular Reference to the American Council of Learned Societies Program." In *Ford Foundation Archives*. Sleepy Hollow, NY: Rockefeller Archive Center, 1970.
- Buell, Lawrence. "The Timeliness of Place: Resoponse to the Presidential Address." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 17-22.
- Fluck, Winfried. "American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals." In *Romance with America? Essays of Culture, Literature, and American Studies by Winfried Fluck*, edited by Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz, 87-104. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009.
- Gleason, Philip. "World War Ii and the Development of American Studies." *American Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1984): 343-58.
- Hones, Sheila, and Julia Leyda. "Geographies of American Studies." *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1019-32.
- Kuhn, Thomas A. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third ed. London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Marx, Leo. "Thoughts on the Origin and Character of the American Studies Movement." *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 398-401.
- Skard, Sigmund. "Spiller: Methods and Problems of Research." In *110 Usortert Sigmund Skard*. Oslo: Norwegian National Library, 1946.
- . *Trans-Atlantica, Memoirs of a Norwegian Americanist*, Publications of the American Instiute University of Oslo. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978. Reprint, 2.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*. Second ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

---

<sup>i</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Second ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 93.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas A. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Third ed. (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), x.

<sup>iii</sup> Leo Marx, "Thoughts on the Origin and Character of the American Studies Movement," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 399.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> "American Studies Abroad, with Particular Reference to the American Council of Learned Societies Program," in *Ford Foundation Archives* (Sleepy Hollow, NY: Rockefeller Archive Center, 1970), 2-3.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>vii</sup> Philip Gleason, "World War Ii and the Development of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1984): 343.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*: 344.

<sup>ix</sup> Marx, "Thoughts on the Origin."

<sup>x</sup> Winfried Fluck, "American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals," in *Romance with America? Essays of Culture, Literature, and American Studies by Winfried Fluck*, ed. Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz, *American Studies (German Association for American Studies)* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009).

<sup>xi</sup> Sigmund Skard, "Spiller: Methods and Problems of Research," in *110 Usortert Sigmund Skard* (Oslo: Norwegian National Library, 1946), 3.

---

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>xiv</sup> ———, *Trans-Atlantica, Memoirs of a Norwegian Americanist*, Publications of the American Institute University of Oslo (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978; reprint, 2.).

<sup>xv</sup> Lawrence Buell, "The Timeliness of Place: Resoponse to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>xvi</sup> Sheila Hones and Julia Leyda, "Geographies of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>xvii</sup> "Ford Foundation Report: American Studies Abroad," 6.