



## **Globalization and American Studies**

**Norman R. Yetman and David M. Katzman**

The label “Made in Zuni” is attached to bracelets, pendants, and rings in “American Indian” jewelry stores throughout the American Southwest. To Zuni craftworkers, however, the presence of this label has had a devastating economic impact and concretely represents the impact of globalization on their lives. Seeking to undercut the price of “authentic” Zuni jewelry, an enterprising American jewelry manufacturer copied Zuni designs, established a jewelry assembly factory in the Philippines, persuaded the local people to rename their village “Zuni,” and then shipped the jewelry to the United States with its not inaccurate but deceptive label (Brooke 1997).

The experience of Zuni craftworkers is but one example of the myriad ways in which American society and culture at the turn of the twenty-first century are being transformed by social, economic, political, and cultural forces far beyond immediate local and national borders. Each of us has similar “globalization” anecdotes that testify to the ways in which our daily experiences are affected—frequently without our knowledge—by an increasingly interdependent world. All of us are aware, at least intuitively, that the world in which we reside is dramatically changing, but we are just beginning to explore the processes that cause, structure, and accelerate these changes. Most immediately visible have been the rapid expansion of information and transportation technologies and a dramatic increase in the mobility of peoples, especially from poorer to richer nations. Less apparent, perhaps, have been the ascendancy of multinational corporations and transnational capital and the triumph of a neoliberal vision of unbridled “free market” economics; the erosion of state sovereignty; increasing global cultural homogenization and hybridization, and, simultaneously, retribalization and a resurgence of racial, ethnic, and religious populism and

conflict. Taken together, these forces have fundamentally changed relations among and within modern societies, including the United States.

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have sought to comprehend these global changes. They have developed globalization theories—which emphasize global forces and processes that transcend and operate autonomously of individual societies, nations, and cultures—as a way of conceptualizing the numerous social, political, economic, and cultural transformations at the end of the American century. American studies scholars have been notably absent from this discourse. Yet day-to-day we encounter the forces of globalization everywhere. The changing racial and ethnic composition of our classrooms is one marker. Another, as Deane Neubauer points out in his essay, is the reference to “Seattle,” which already has taken on an identification of protest and commitment similar to what some of us referred to as “the March” and “Selma” nearly forty years ago. Yet another is the allure of a tantalizing array of ethnic cuisine at the national meetings of the American Studies Association. Indeed, although increasing numbers of international scholars have appeared on the ASA’s annual program, their presence has not itself contributed substantially to a broader examination of globalization and its consequences—for both American society and culture and for the underlying relationship between the United States and their own countries of origin.

This double issue of *American Studies* focuses on the impact of globalization, on the ways in which it has been conceptualized within different discourses, genres, and disciplines, and on some ways of reconceptualizing it. What is globalization? What different dimensions and processes can be identified under this broad rubric? Is it a new phenomenon? What are its driving forces? What are its consequences and implications, especially for comprehending American society and culture and American studies in the future? In particular, how are global forces initiated in the United States affecting the rest of the world and, conversely, in what ways are American society and culture themselves affected and transformed by globalization?

Given the transnational thrust of globalization, what are its implications for the future of the nation-state? For national sovereignty? For notions of citizenship and democracy? Can globalization and democracy co-exist? How are the global and the local linked? What is the relationship between the mobility of capital and the mobility of people in a globalized world? How are globalization, migration, and identity related? What is the relationship between globalization and the maintenance and/or transformation of cultural, ethnic, and religious communities? What are the effects of globalization on the study of the United States—i.e., American studies—itself? Although such questions do not exhaust the topic, they are the starting point for this issue of *American Studies*. The authors in this issue attempt to address these questions from a broad range of perspectives, vantages, and subject positions. They include theoretical discussions, historical perspectives, case studies, literature reviews, and personal memoirs.

Four years ago Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez (1996) crafted a provocative article in which they urged that American studies be contextualized within a “critical internationalism.” The main thrust of their argument was that the study of the United States must be situated in a global context, and they called for a “new kind of scholarship about the U.S.” One of the implications of their article was that current paradigms in American studies, which generally eschew focus on macro processes such as globalization, should be reconsidered. In sum, their case for resituating American studies in a broader global context was consonant with our own uneasiness with what we perceived to be an insular focus within American studies scholarship that was both inconsistent with and oblivious to the new economic, political, social, demographic, and cultural realities at the end of the American century.

Building on previous special issues examining the state of American studies (*American Studies* 1997, 1999) and Desmond and Dominguez’s challenge to incorporate a transnational paradigm for conceptualizing American society and culture, in 1997 we proposed to the editorial board of *American Studies* that our Summer 2000 issue focus on the topic “Globalization and American Studies.” Given their recognition of the increasing need for American studies scholars to engage not only the topic of globalization but also the ways in which it had been articulated by scholars in other disciplines, members of the board enthusiastically endorsed this proposal. Moreover, they also suggested that, in order to place issues of globalization more prominently on the American studies agenda and to publicize our call for papers for the 2000 special issue, we propose a session on that topic for the 1998 ASA meetings in Seattle. The theme of these meetings, “American Studies and the Question of Empire: Histories, Cultures, and *Practices*,” (our underscoring), was designed to address the march of American conquest, imperialism, and colonization in the century since the Spanish-American War. “The theme must not be read as soliciting work for discussion of 1898 only”; the call for papers announced, “the national history of ‘empire’ extends to social, cultural, and economic processes that extend before and beyond explicit ‘imperial’ moments like 1898.” Consequently, we thought that a session on “Globalization and American Studies” was not only appropriate and timely but also essential to comprehending the pervasive forms of the American “empire” at the end of the American century.

Accordingly, we submitted a proposal for a session on globalization to the 1998 program committee. The proposal included two nationally prominent sociologists and a junior colleague in American literature whose work has engaged such issues but also linked discussion of globalization with the “questions of empire” in the twentieth century. Given the enthusiastic response of our editorial board and the conference theme, we were surprised when we received the form e-mail post from the ASA informing us that, although worthy, the program committee had been deluged with meritorious proposals (which we have no doubt was the case), but they just didn’t have room to include the proposed

session on “Globalization and American Studies.” It seems to us that the reluctance of the program committee to include the session not only contradicted official association statements hailing the importance of “internationalistic” perspectives, but was also telling about the kinds of American studies projects deemed worthy of inclusion within its rubric.

First, although we may invoke the virtues of the “interdisciplinarity” of American studies, our practice of what disciplines to include in studying the United States is extremely limited. Too frequently are perspectives, courses, issues, or debates emanating from the social sciences in general and sociology, anthropology, political science, international relations, or economics in particular deemed irrelevant to the discourses in “American studies.” Despite (or perhaps because of) the enormous impact of an energetic and expansive cultural studies, the primary data and models with which “American studies” have become equated and identified have tended to be drawn from the humanities, especially literature and media studies, ironically returning “American studies” to a kinship with literary works reminiscent of the origins and early development of the discipline (*American Studies* 1997). Desmond and Dominguez recognize this explicitly at several points in their article, in which they locate American studies solely within the humanities. Although the humanities have always been prominent—even dominant—in American studies, it seems to us that today the pervasive emphasis on cultural models and notions of identity often obscure issues of political and economic structures and power that have engaged social scientists, especially scholars addressing the dramatic transformation of the global political economy—in which the United States is deeply implicated—and its impact, especially in the post-Cold War era. For example, there is little evidence—in either the program of the national ASA or in its major publications—to contradict the assertion that few *American studies* scholars have devoted much attention to such issues as the implications of transition from Fordist to a post-Fordist economy, or, as Robert Antonio and Alessandro Bonanno characterize it, regime; to assessing the critical impact of multinational corporations on American society and culture; or to examining the interests involved in the crafting or the consequences of NAFTA and the subsequent responses in Seattle and Washington, D.C., that it and other transnational organizations have recently elicited.

Similarly, the shifts in American studies over the last twenty-five years to focus on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, however salutary, have led away from macro perspectives. This is not inevitable, but, it is the course that recent American studies scholarship has followed. Thus comprehension of American society as a whole is rarely practiced and the influence of broader global forces are obscured. Integration of society, culture, politics, and economics is rarely attempted in American studies. Moreover, few *American studies* scholars are undertaking broad macroscopic analyses such as Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad and McWorld*, Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, or

George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* that are explicitly macro in perspective.

Third, it is problematic whether the call for greater "internationalism" in American society will necessarily achieve the paradigm shift in American studies that we are advocating. Most often the "internationalization" of American studies has simply involved opening the existing discourse to the perspectives of foreign scholars. Even providing a broader context for a "critical internationalism" that would "create the conditions for a critical interface between domestic and international perspectives," which Benjamin Lee (1995, 591) has urged, provides no assurances that a broader global-system perspective would ensue. Indeed, as Bernard Mergen points out in his article in this issue, "American studies" has often been located within English departments in international colleges and universities. Even in many English-speaking institutions outside the United States, American studies is thus equated with the old combination of history and literature (now expanded to include a variety of media forms). This structural limitation makes it unlikely that most international scholars interested in "American studies" will develop the kind of (macro) "international" perspective from *American studies* that we are urging here; such a stance may be drawn from the personal experiences of international American studies scholars situated in non-U.S. settings, which afford them the opportunity to observe the United States as an outsider, but this is simply an accident of geography, not a consequence of the substantive or conceptual perspectives of the discipline of American studies itself.

Thus, we would like to revive one of the alternative structural arrangements to which Janice Radway alluded in her provocative 1998 ASA presidential address (Radway 1999). It seems to us that for American studies effectively to "internationalize," we need a radical organizational transformation; we propose that American studies be resituated within a broader framework (or, institutionally, within the organizational framework) of "global studies" in which American studies would be one among several constituent "area studies." But the primary focus would not simply be to examine the United States, but to shift the focus to an even broader unit of analysis—for example, the world-system, to use Immanuel Wallerstein's terminology—and, armed with the kinds of models that might emerge from this shift in focus, to return to considering American society and cultures. In other words, we need to do more than encourage and support the voices of international scholars studying the United States; we need to *globalize* its study: to shift the focus of American studies to examine much more fully and critically the role of the United States in the global system in its multiple dimensions. Such a programmatic shift would enable *American studies* to become truly international in focus; it would enable us to observe the ways in which the United States has impacted and is impacted by the global and transnational forces of which we are increasingly aware but with which we cannot yet fully and effectively come to grips.

We are not arguing that we abandon the study of the United States. Indeed, precisely because of the enormous political, economic, military, and cultural power of the United States and its role as the world's sole superpower, a critical *American studies* becomes even more imperative. Moreover, the objective in our call to subsume American studies in a broader context of global studies is not simply to examine the enormous impact of American culture and society abroad, but also—and equally imperative—to examine the dynamics of this new international system and the ways in which the United States is affected by this “new global world order.”

A macro or globalized American studies practice is important if we are to retain a critical view of the United States. Specialized studies and monographs often assume, and the champions of globalization and the new technologies preach, that globalization is historically inevitable. As Antonio and Bonanno point out, the neoliberal doctrine of the powerlessness of the nation-state to control transnational corporations and capital is seductive. The articles in this issue challenge that *a priori* assumption, and in the process demystify economics and politics, illuminating that, just as concepts of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, so also is the concept “free market,” which is integral to the ideology of neoliberalism through which economic globalization is maintained and justified.

We would like to close with another—to us—telling anecdote. From 1994 through 1997 we issued and periodically renewed a call for papers for a special issue of *American Studies* that would focus on recent immigration to the United States. We were hoping that we could engage American studies scholars, especially those with interests in race and ethnicity, to fathom collectively the causes, consequences, and characteristics of this extraordinary phenomenon, which in the last quarter century has contributed to the dramatic transformation of American society and culture. Yet despite widespread and continuing publicity for this issue, we received only *one* submission. Yet we all know—or at least sense—that this immigration from every corner of the earth is one of the most dramatic social and cultural transformations of the late-twentieth century and is a harbinger of the future not simply of the United States but of the entire world. If, as American studies scholars, we are to comprehend the society within which most of us live, we cannot be content to leave scholarly understanding of such a critical phenomenon as recent immigration to the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics; we must engage in its analysis with them.

Inclusion of American studies within a broader interdisciplinary category of global studies and the shift of the unit of analysis that it implies would not force us to abandon the study of the United States or specialized case studies of the local. In the case of recent immigration, it would, as Saskia Sassen argues in her analysis in this issue, impel us to recognize immigration as the logical and inevitable consequences of the economic globalization of capital, and, therefore,

to consider from a new perspective questions of immigrant identity, assimilation, and citizenship and, indeed, the entire meaning of democracy. This would enable us as American studies scholars to truly bring international scholars into the debate over the United States and to participate in the ongoing conversation about the discipline's parameters, while still enabling those of us who remain fascinated by this colossus to continue our fixation on it; it would simply mean that we would have to ask different questions about American society and culture.

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