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Boycott Debate Is Symptom of Broader Shift in American Studies

By Christopher Shea

The furor over the vote by members of the American Studies Association to boycott Israeli institutions has reawakened questions about the organization, and American studies generally, that run far deeper than a single political stand.

The group's critics say the incident—which has elicited condemnations by more than 80 college presidents and led many institutions to withdraw from membership—confirms their belief that American studies represents a nadir of academic posturing and identity politics.

These critics charge that today's American-studies scholars are a mere shadow of the pioneers in the field, who produced pathbreaking scholarship in the mid-20th century on topics like the Puritan mind, the relationship between Americans and the land, and the tension between pastoral and technological elements in American society.

Members of the ASA, meanwhile, argue that their opponents are cultural conservatives who are using criticism of the boycott as a vehicle to further their own retrograde views, scholars who would turn back the clock to a time before women's studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial theory made their mark.

When or if the anger over the boycott dies down, significant intellectual issues will remain, including which approaches are truly welcome in the field and whether political activism represents a departure from the American-studies mission or a logical extension of its recent scholarship.

“In truth, it has been a while since the ASA commanded wide

respect as a heavyweight professional organization,” David Greenberg, an associate professor of history and journalism at Rutgers University at New Brunswick, wrote last month in *The New Republic*, in a typical attack. He quoted David Hollinger, a history professor at the University of California at Berkeley, who described the ASA as “a shell of its former self.”

Years of Debate

This is not the first time critics have deplored changes in the field. A decade ago, *The New Republic* was also the site of a much-noted broadside from Alan Wolfe, a professor of political science at Boston College, who argued that much American-studies scholarship evinced “hatred for America.”

Almost from the birth of American studies, a great amount of scholarly energy has been devoted to debating its methodology and proper subject of study. Indeed, its birthday is debatable (might Alexis de Tocqueville count as an American-studies scholar?), but institutionally it began to take hold in the mid-1900s, serving as home to scholars who found themselves gravitating toward a space “between” literature and history departments.

Harvard University’s graduate program in the History of American Civilization, created in 1937 (and recently renamed the Program in American Studies), was the first Ph.D. program in the field. Early classics in the discipline included *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), by Henry Nash Smith, and *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), by Leo Marx, which combined readings of literary texts with intellectual, political, and social history to trace themes in American identity. It was the era of “symbol-myth-image” studies.

Early American-studies debates centered on whether it should focus on literary texts or take a more sociological approach, but the first real upheaval came in the 1960s and 70s, as scholars embraced ethnic studies, black studies, and folklore studies; subsequently, queer studies and postcolonial studies entered the mix, not to mention film studies, visual culture, and environmental studies. By the 1980s, the archetypical American-

studies book was no longer Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* but, say, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984).

In recent years, the dominant approach has been “transnational American studies.” Lisa Duggan, the incoming American Studies Association president and a professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University, says people surprised by the boycott may not have been paying attention to this shift. (She and other association leaders insisted on answering questions via email, saying the news media have been misquoting them.) The “transnational” rubric encompasses studies of American imperialism abroad as well as interpretations of social and cultural developments within the United States as byproducts of global trends.

It's clear that that evolutionary arc unsettles some scholars. Stephen J. Whitfield, a professor of American studies at Brandeis University, says he became disillusioned with the ASA as far back as the early 90s, when “it was becoming increasingly politicized in ways in which—though I might share the politics, as a citizen—I didn't think were remotely appropriate for a scholarly organization.” *American Quarterly*, the association's flagship journal, was becoming “increasingly jargon-infested” and focused on “esoteric” subjects, he says.

In response to such charges, Curtis Marez, the current ASA president and an associate professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at San Diego, says by email that the group remains receptive to various scholarly approaches. He points out that *American Quarterly* has twice since 2009 won the prize for Best Special Issue from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

The boycott has served as a “Trojan horse,” Mr. Marez says, “enabling some scholars to indirectly express their resentment against a turn toward questions related to race and sexuality.”

In general, American-studies scholars today presuppose a skepticism that anything coherent can be said about something so broad as “America,” and they ritualistically lambaste

“neoliberalism” at home and abroad. Richard H. King, a professor emeritus of American and Canadian studies at the University of Nottingham, says the nomenclature works quite differently abroad: Whereas in Britain “American studies” remains a generic term for everyone interested in American subject matter, in the United States it connotes a particular radical perspective and a particular scholarly focus, “the race-class-gender-sexuality cluster of concerns—plus the transnational turn.”

“I’m not totally out of sympathy with the focus on those issues,” he says, but it leaves much out, he thinks, including an interest in American regionalism and in the kind of intellectual history once common in the field. (Much of Mr. King’s own work has focused on race relations and the American South.)

Influence on Other Fields

Some critics cast American studies as a victim of its own success: “Cultural history, intellectual history, women’s history—all these things got their start in American studies,” says Bruce Kuklick, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Pennsylvania and editor of *American Quarterly* from 1974 to 1982. Once scholars with an interdisciplinary bent were able to do all of those things within history and English departments, they had less need of American studies, per se, he says, and the association began to be taken over by people with an aggressively political take on the field. Many of these new-breed American-studies scholars came from ethnic-studies departments, he suggests.

All six current members of the ASA executive committee have written on gender or ethnicity, but only Mr. Marez has a sole appointment in an ethnic-studies department.

Ms. Duggan, the incoming president, responds by email that the association “is absolutely open” for those scholars who retreated from the ASA to return and engage at conferences and events: “Those who have been inactive should get active, rather than blame the more active members for their absence.”

In terms of sheer numbers, the group’s membership has remained steady, ranging between 4,000 and 5,000 for the past 20 years, and

it has seen a net gain of nearly 200 members since the boycott vote, its leaders say.

The flaring up of culture-war language upsets some ASA members. “I’m uncomfortable with the way that people who are against the boycott have used the language of ‘taking back’ or ‘reclaiming’ ASA,” says David J. Leonard, an associate professor in the department of critical culture, gender, and race studies at Washington State University. The language assumes that there are “rightful owners” of the field, he says, and dismisses decades of American-studies scholarship.

Some scholars see a straightforward generational divide in pro- and anti-ASA sentiment, but the divisions are not nearly so neat. Nor do beliefs about scholarship map precisely onto beliefs about the boycott. “I have been working on gender and its implications for race and class for 20 years,” says Mary C. Kelley, a professor of history, American culture, and women’s studies at the University of Michigan who was also one of eight former association presidents who condemned the boycott in a joint letter. She says she believes that when the group takes political positions, it should focus on academic issues like the adjunct crisis and funding for the humanities.

So does Mark Rice, a professor of American studies at St. John Fisher College, in Rochester, N.Y. He argues that a firm line should be drawn between transnational scholarship, which he embraces—he has published in the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*—and international political activism.

Around the time of the boycott vote, Rice started a blog called the *Future of American Studies*, where he has made the case that the programs most likely to be hurt by the ASA’s forceful move into politics are those like his, at small- to middle-size colleges without graduate programs. In financially straitened times, interdisciplinary programs have been under scrutiny from administrators, Mr. Rice says, and he believes that the ASA’s energies should be focused on demonstrating the intellectual vitality of the field, its centrality to colleges’ missions.

In flush times, political and cultural warfare might bear no cost. But with the humanities already being eyed by administrators eager for savings, programs that can't come to a basic agreement about what their members should be doing may draw unwanted attention.

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aloofbooks · a day ago

It is clear that American Studies as a discipline is a very important one, yet it is at a crossroads. There are too many factions within the discipline who have self serving and arguably, sinister agendas. This sort of behavior could eventually lead to the demise of this most distinctive and interdisciplinary field of study.

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PublicPoster · a day ago

Sometimes the language of resentment isn't even that indirect. In another piece, Brandeis professor Whitfield blames the ASA boycott on "the emergence of Ethnic Studies" which "may have tilted the organization heavily in favor of people of color, in this case the Palestinians."

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profmomof1 · 5 hours ago

When professional organizations decide to focus on political agendas, they should expect to alienate about half of their constituencies (since Americans in general seem to be divided that way). Some professionals will drop out of the organization if they are opposed to the political agenda and some administrators and funders will be turned off of that whole field and will withdraw support. Those are simply consequences.

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zincwarrior → profmomof1 · 3 hours ago

Agreed.

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average_joe · 4 hours ago

We are dealing with two issues here:

* First, the recent public pronouncement of hatred towards Israel by ASA.

* The second, the relevance of the discipline of American Studies.

I cannot justify why we need a discipline (as Alan Wolfe from Boston College correctly pointed out) focused on spewing "hatred for America" in college campuses. The Europeans and Moslems do a good job of that. Why duplicate their efforts? In fact, the hatred towards Israel is another form of hatred towards America, its institutions, its heritage and its public policy- past and present.

It is futile to reform something intrinsically unsound. Academic areas such as Ethnic Studies, Chicano/Chicana Studies, American Studies, Gender Studies and Women's Studies by and large provide platforms for dwelling on what is or has been wrong with America. Young minds are corrupted to hate our heritage and its successes. Students graduate prepared only for going to graduate

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11137138 · 2 hours ago

This is a helpful article in charting the changes that have overtaken the

