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Introduction

After the long era of the nation-state, when the organization of politics, economics, and societies revolved around a concept promoted since the beginning of the modern age and the supposed "consent of the governed," and after the two bourgeois revolutions in the United States and France, the centrality of border-crossing, cross-fertilization, interaction, and contextual development of human societies regained its standing as an essential medium for the comprehension of societies and cultures and their necessary interplay. Actually, and inescapably, it was never truly gone. Although often set aside as a cumbersome and useless dimension, transnationalism has inevitably informed the study and analysis of societies and cultures for a long time.

Transnationalism, as a context and a concept, existed in empires and colonies of old as well as in later nation-states, despite the efforts made by many to deny what is an inevitable outcome of human history founded upon interactions, exchange, migrations, and hybridization. Obviously, nation-states, strong in their imperial projections, could not but deny transnationalism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the nation-state had become the scholarly unit for the study of history, literature, and the emerging social sciences, and since then scholars in different fields have grown accustomed to considering the nation-state as the basic unit of their research and analyses. In fact, since anthropology and sociology were born in the era of nationalism and empires, they often became the justification for the distancing and "othering" of different cultures that did not conceive the nation in Euro-Atlantic terms and were therefore considered inferior. This approach enabled historians, literary critics, social scientists, and researchers in new fields to create a self-serving construction of the idea of the interaction of people and countries that led to the emergence of an international model, which actually assumes that nation-states are

immutable and universal structures, essential as starting points for research. This was very much the case in U.S. history and literary criticism, where the idea of exceptionalism emerged in the 1940s as the best justification of a conceivable American exclusivity, though one of many. Indeed, each nation-state is exceptional in its own way.

With the very purpose of going beyond that concept and right before the American involvement in World War I, Randolph Bourne published a famous essay in *The Atlantic*, entitled "Trans-National America." Although Bourne's essay concentrates on American society and was written with two main goals – disputing the myth of the melting-pot in America and condemning the war in Europe – its basic assumptions became the foundations of a movement of ideas that, in the second half of the 20th century, began promoting a different approach to the social sciences, as well as to history and literary criticism. The major legacy of Bourne's brief essay is not only its view of a pluralist society that should not deny cultural and ethnic differences but rather appreciate and enhance them; it is also and foremost the idea that there is no dominant point of view or interpretation of human societies and human beings, and, as a result, there is no single reading of reality and history. Yet, Bourne's work remains in the sphere of American exceptionalism, because his reading of trans-national America makes the nation's experience a unique undertaking different from any other. A year earlier, another young intellectual had published an essay in *The Nation* entitled "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot." According to Jonathan Hansen, Horace Kallen's essay served as a "wake-up call for a generation of democrats slow to respond to mounting cultural reaction… World War I made American intellectuals particularly self-conscious about the hazards of national identity based on geographic, linguistic, and ancestral ties" (92-93). The concerns of the early 20th century are replicated today as the local and the global push toward a redefinition of the self and of one's own community. Once again, Hansen best synthesizes the concept by writing that "In a heterogeneous nation, no less than in an increasingly interconnected world, the way to protect the interests of one's own community was to defend the community rights of all" (93).

However, Horace Kallen and John Dewey assumed an ethnocentric stance and excluded altogether Indians and African-Americans from their

discourse on a pluralist society. In fact, Indians could not be part of the body politic since they were actually construed as the very opposite of nation-building. In negating Indians, Americans could assert their own existence as a nation, while African-Americans were kept entirely out of the picture, as they represented an embarrassment for the new pluralistic identity liberal Americans were concocting (Trachtenberg 122).

The first two decades of the 20th century best represent a transition that was as much domestic as it was international. The balance of forces across the Atlantic began tilting toward the west as the United States assumed its new dominant position worldwide. The country had also to face its internal contradictions, while redefining social relations and its international position. This required a model that could help read both domestic and international politics and society. Transnationalism, which had flourished in the 19th century was thus temporarily revived. In fact, while the national spirit informed most of the political and ideal movements of the long 19th century, the ideas of internationalism and transnationalism thrived among intellectuals and fighters for freedom. One may think only about the ideals of the French and American revolutions, of Mazzini's design of a united youth fighting for freedom and republican values across borders, a utopia that found some correspondence in history with the movement of ideals and people across the Atlantic, or the international resonance of the American Civil War (Isabella, Doyle). Horace Greeley's fiery articles on the inevitable contamination and spread of republican ideals were seeds of major consequence in the 20th century, despite the repeated attempts by tyrannies and absolute monarchies and empires to bury them in a past that was never gone (Bender, Fiorentino). Periodically, those ideals re-emerged and contributed to the further construction not only of new nation-states, but among them of many democracies. Moreover, nation-states are not the sole actors in transnational exchanges; other non-governmental units such as corporate and multinational enterprises are actors along with, but also beyond and above, the nation-states (Nye-Keohane 23). This combination of factors represented an important cause in the decline of the political transnational movement at the end of the 1800s.

Therefore, in order to understand American culture and society, its transformation over time, and its changes and anxieties – since we well know

that there is no such a thing as a static culture or society – it is necessary to broaden the analysis and consider the more general context in which events take place, in which human personalities and identities develop individually or collectively. Actually, the transnational configuration is an excellent instrument to follow such transformations, as it is intrinsically dynamic, diachronic, and flexible. Its major focus consists of border crossing, interchange, shared cultural patterns and customs, and above all contact. In particular, the study of American transnationalism, as well underlined by Giorgio Mariani, should proceed on parallel tracks. In order to understand the nature of American culture and society, its history and its artistic products, the analysis should take a transnational approach both when perusing domestic issues – the interaction among different groups and the composite expression of its population – and while scrutinizing the international scenario, such as the exchange and cross-fertilization with other nations and transnational political actors (Izzo and Mariani 10-11). In this sense, the reflection offered by Winfried Fluck on the domestic import of the transnational approach is quite exemplary: "We are now in a better position to understand the reason for the emergence of transnational American Studies and its theoretical significance. This emergence can be seen as a consequence of Cultural Studies' and American Studies' ever more desperate search for a configuration or location that would still be able to provide an oppositional perspective" (71). The risk, though, is to confine the transnational approach to a typical American self-serving instrument, apt to demonstrate once again the validity of exceptionalism. An inclusive reading of American culture should instead assume a true transnational intention, i.e. America can best be understood by positioning it within a broader spatial and temporal discourse. It is true that scholars and practitioners of American Studies worldwide are influenced by the agenda of American specialists, but it is also true that the debate initiated especially at the turn of the century, although initially self-referential, has opened up a reflection in which many other non-American scholars are now participating.

Moreover, studying transnationalism inevitably calls for an interdisciplinary approach, since every scholar knows that approaching processes that are not constrained within borders of any kind and cut across cultures and

national boundaries requires the intersection of different methods. In a way, in order to understand the United States, as any nation and culture, it is necessary to transcend it. How can a historian understand, for example, the transatlantic process of ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century without knowing the literary production of those years, observing through demography and anthropology the constant migration flows, and analyzing them with the help of sociology? Behind all this, there is of course also the role of the politicians and the public administration, which approve laws and apply them, and the contribution, often the determinant role, of economic agencies and financial actors. The stimulating and prominent function of finance and trade, too often an independent factor that hovers on the lives of the multitudes neglecting their daily needs and secret ambitions, is definitely to be taken into account. More recently, the new media and the possibility of instant communication across borders has further contributed in Appadurai's words to "create diasporic public spheres…that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes" (4).

The incessant modification of political and cultural relations calls for an update and adjustment of the structures and infrastructures of the interplay of different nations, governments, peoples. It is not by chance that a major urge for a return to a transnational analysis came with the end of the Cold War, and especially in the 1990s. Globalization, pointed out by many as Americanization, called for a new approach capable of reconsidering American culture and history within a wider context, in its inevitable interplay with other realities and processes. In this sense, the transnational turn in American Studies should be carefully scrutinized as it represents a new, updated version of American Studies rather than its overcoming, or its actual "re-contextualization." Amy Kaplan and Fluck have warned about this risk and the way transnational theory is used to study the United States (Fluck, 59-60; Kaplan, 156-58). In that decade, studies such as Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* or Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* contributed to a redesigning of cultural theory and literary criticism, affecting in turn also the realms of history and political science. This approach considers cultural difference as a fact and a starting point, necessary to examine exchange and mutual understanding

while overcoming the limits of a self-referential national interpretation. Practitioners of American Studies should also transcend nationality by assuming certain categories as universal, and considering the following statement by Bhabha as a guiding principle of their analysis: "The aim of cultural difference is to re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying *singularity* of the 'other' that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding-*to* does not add-up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification" (312).

In the end, the purpose is to overcome myopic self-referentiality and exceptionalism and to move beyond the drive to internationalize American Studies that, although useful at the end of the 20th century, now represents a limit. That drive was in fact generated by the need to redefine the discipline on its own terms while opening it to scholars from other countries, while on conditions dictated by American scholars or scholars trained in the United States. Undoubtedly, 9/11 contributed to a temporary halt in such speculations or at least to a slowing down of the new research. The wound suffered by the United States contributed to a softer approach to the dissecting of American identity and a questioning of the supremacy of the United States in the new world order. Now, again, scholars accept transnationalism as matter of fact, but all too often they end up taking it for granted without applying an analysis that should be the natural starting point, if not the final objective, of any critical examination.

These are some of the speculations that convinced the Center for American Studies in Rome and the Association of North American Studies in Italy to organize their historic annual seminar in 2015 on the very subject of transnationalism and the interdisciplinary approach. It was high time for Italian graduate students and young scholars to tackle an issue they have considered but seldom have had the opportunity to discuss with American and European specialists. The excellent lectures and the debate that ensued convinced the editorial board of this journal to ask some of the speakers to contribute to a monographic issue on the same topics, in order to offer their analyses to a larger audience. The four essays that follow are state of the art, scholarly sound and thought-provoking studies on, or informed

by, transnationalism. They offer an excellent perspective on contemporary American society with original reflections on the methodologies that can enable scholars from different disciplines to approach their research. Both Bender's and Bogg's articles point out how the transnational dimension is much older than the field of American Studies and actually warn about its possible demise. The transnational approach, claims Boggs, is losing momentum not because it is useless or has been replaced by some other and newer methodology, but because of the new meaning often attached to it, I would say abused, in the media: something related to trade and power struggles. Although many by now consider transnationalism as a central assumption in the analysis of historical and literary trends, often exceptionalism, as well pointed out by Bender, is "like a Jack-in-the-Box" which periodically pops up and tends to reorient our approach to American Studies. The essays by Fasce and McAlister prove instead how transnationalism is still a much needed approach that emerges inevitably as the researcher looks especially at American experiences overseas, and not only. The implication of their work also concerns the repercussion that American agents' actions abroad have on the sense of nationhood and belonging, and how they influence domestic relations.

Bender and Boggs both deal with the use of transnationalism as a category, but it is evident how American Studies has been forced more immediately to reconsider its practice and application, first of all because it is a much younger field of research and also because of its different use of the parameters which lay at its basis. Boggs underlines how transnationalism is nowadays considered outdated by many but insists also on the ways it can still have something to contribute to our understanding of the United States and of its positioning in the world context. One of the major risks Boggs highlights is in the way the term and its significance have been popularized in the past few decades, reducing it to a label indicating something relating mainly to global trade, often confused with globalization and a prerogative of elites. Its origin and usage is instead much different and the approach still has a lot to offer to those who intend to explore new perspectives in American Studies. The transnational frame, in fact, identifies the United States as a "nation among nations," a definition Bender himself used as a title for his book published in 2008, a much more realistic perspective

than the exceptionalist one. It is a contradiction in terms to think that the country has such a peculiar experience as to stand, somehow, outside of the progression and chronological deployment of history. It is evident how exceptionalism is actually more an ideology than a framework or a methodology that has served the United States in times of international crisis. In a way it is a perfect justification for what Frank Ninkovich has termed "the Wilsonian Century." The so-called American century (most of the 1900s) saw in fact the growing role of the United States as a world power in much troubled waters. The Wilsonian approach responded to the destabilizing threats that the international involvement of the country brought to its own self-perception, identifying the "American way" as a universal model. Actually, by claiming its uniqueness, Americans ended up making it exceptional which, as well indicated by Bender, it is something much different than defining it as special or unique: "Exceptional excludes – writes Bender –, while special is generous, as is unique."

Boggs takes the argument further in the realm of American Studies, "in the plural," as she correctly underlines. Transnationalism, she continues, is one of the instruments at the scholar's disposal, one of the many approaches that contribute to enriching the analysis of American culture and enabling the observer to go beyond either the discipline he/she practices or the ideal constructs of his/her culture of provenance and background. For this reason, Boggs calls for a "Positioning of the United States 'between' transnationalism and interculturality." This positioning offers the possibility of what she calls a third space, a dimension that facilitates dialogue, and I would add that it opens the possibility of a multilayered observation that can overcome the unilateral perception of a one dimensional analysis. To borrow terminology from anthropology, there is an opportunity to construe a "thick description," (Geertz) or, according to James Clifford, to make that description dialogic and intercultural. An interdisciplinary approach in this sense would guarantee a more complete observation and analysis as ethnography and anthropology can lend important instruments to history, cultural studies and literary criticism. As Clifford writes in his seminal essay, "Partial Truths," since ethnography worked to move away from its imperialistic origins and unilateral observation points, it has rediscovered "otherness and difference also in the cultures of the West." "It has become clear – he concludes – that every version of an 'other,' wherever

found, is also the construction of a 'self,' and the making of ethnographic texts" (23). The same should apply to American Studies; its ample fields of ethnographic observation still need to be ploughed.

McAlister makes use of this methodology in her study of the evangelical short-term missions movement by showing how its supposed transnational vocation actually reveals much more about the Americans who travel on these programs than about contact or the peoples they visit. She defines this practice of evangelical churches, and of the people traveling on their programs, as a form of "enchanted internationalism." The idea that they can learn about distant and "exotic" realities by bringing at the same time relief to the people they visit may represent a form of imperialist ethnographic discourse. Actually, she manages to dissect the significance of a form of transnationalism that is in a way very similar to the composition of an ethnographic text in which the construction of the self probably plays a bigger part than the unveiling of the "other." At the same time, studying the way these trips are carried out and their format, reveals an approach not so different from the traditional travel abroad experience. Here too, the traveler does not necessarily participate in trans-cultural exchange when experiencing contact, but rather concocts his/her own image of the other, which is a "self-serving transnational construct."

Yet, toward the end of the essay, the author well points out the increased travel and the opportunity of contact that contribute to expanding the acquisition of a "global vision" while the "affective longings" that make possible American evangelical intersection with other cultures represent a new form of transnational experience. In a similar way, Fasce manages to demonstrate how the supposed two-way post-WWII interaction between the United States and Italy in the field of advertising is actually part of a much larger "multifaceted transatlantic dialogue among American, British and Italian advertisers and agencies and professionals whose experience encompassed a transnational and global dimension."

Fasce's fascinating case-study is an original development of a research carried out by Bini and Fasce between 2014 and 2015 and published in the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing.* The essay combines the analysis of the adaptation of American strategies to appeal to the Italian market with a reading of how the process affected not only the very structure of such agencies as they went global, but also the changing landscape of transatlantic

connections. The latter, as described by Mary Nolan in *The Transatlantic Century*, characterized the growth of a transnational space in which the Americanization of Europe should rather be seen as part of a much more complex transnational process. Americanization thus falls within a larger transatlantic and transnational context that shows how intra-European exchange plays a major role in redesigning exchange, cultural or economic, as a much wider experience (336-37). In this sense, while commodities and the products of American popular culture had a major impact on Europe in the first phase of the Cold War, as much as they had in the first quarter of the century, the outcome was very different from what most historians and political scientists, not to mention the economists, claim. The opening of a common European space and market, favored also by the progressive shared acquisition of American goods and practices, created a different and more united Europe that, although strictly connected with the United States, has developed an original identity based as much on the transatlantic exchange as on the tragic, and peculiarly European, experiences of the first half of the 20th century (346).

The experience of J. Walter Thompson in Italy, writes Fasce, is proof of these developments and of the usefulness of the new methodological instruments as well as of the transnational paradigm. Although the American imperial phase should not be overlooked, it is clear how the United States was affected in turn by a process that was neither unilateral nor bilateral, but was, and is, part of a more complex and wider circulation of goods, peoples, as well as values and ideas in the global context which are not necessarily Americanized. The transnational approach therefore represents one of the most effective instruments to comprehend both American international interactions and the development of American society between the 20th and 21st centuries. This is exactly what the following essays set about doing.

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