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A New Beginning?: Transnationalisms

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Abstract

In recent years, debates about the theory and method of American studies have gone in a new direction called transnational American studies. This transnational project can be seen as a response to an impasse in the analysis of power effects that prior approaches in American studies had reached. Since the search for subject positions that would not yet be subject to the power effects of interpellation had already led to border regions and intercultural spaces, why not go beyond the border altogether into transnational spaces like the Southern hemisphere, the transatlantic world, the Pacific Rim or others? In this sense, transnational studies can indeed serve as a useful antidote to analyses of American society and culture based on the idea of American exceptionalism. However, to describe the potential of an interpretive perspective does not yet tell us for what purpose this potential is being used. This essay, therefore, focuses on the actual uses that are being made of a transnational perspective in current American studies. It identifies two major interpretive paradigms—esthetic transnationalism and political transnationalism—and analyzes their underlying assumptions and characteristic narratives over a wide range of studies in the

A New Beginning? Transnationalisms

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IN RECENT YEARS, DEBATES ABOUT the theory and method of American studies have gone in a new direction called transnational American studies. This transnational project can be seen as a response to an impasse that prior approaches in American studies had reached. Analyses of American society and culture by the New Americanists had been carried to a point where subjection by means of interpellation through the nation-state seemed to be all pervasive, so that resistance had to resort to ever more marginalized subject positions as possible sources of disinterpellation. At this point, transnationalism could become the logical next step in what may be seen as a story of continuous retreat, "because all other options to find a point of resistance within the U.S. have been critically unmasked and dismissed."¹ Since the search for subject positions that would not yet be subject to the power-effects of interpellation had already led to border regions and intercultural spaces, why not go beyond the border altogether into spaces like the Southern hemisphere, the Pacific Rim, or the transatlantic world, or still even further, to reconfigure the object of analysis as global or planetary?

The relief in the field at the transnational turn has inspired a set of narratives about new beginnings. Transnationalism promises a regeneration of the field and its long overdue liberation from what Amy Kaplan has called the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism. Almost all approaches within the field of American studies share this view, intellectual history as well as social history, critical race and gender studies as well as liberal multiculturalism, New Americanists as well as aesthetically minded literary scholars (if there are still any left). One of the key components of this "cutting-edge" consensus is the assumption that the term transnationalism has a commonly shared meaning and that when we use the term, we refer to the same phenomenon and procedure: to pursue a transnational approach means to go beyond the borders of the nation-state as an object of analysis. In an age of globalization, such a project is obviously timely and the description of transnational studies as a bold step across borders is ideally suited to serve as a common-sense legitimation.



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