

TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES. A RUSSIAN VIEW

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ABSTRACT. *Teaching American Studies. A Russian View.* The article addresses the issue of teaching American studies to university students. In the atmosphere of anti-Americanism which characterizes life in contemporary Russia, the subject acquires a particular significance as an effective means of educating people for democracy. Such an approach determines the choice of topics and the method of presentation. The author discusses both challenges of American democracy and its advantages, as viewed from Russia. Particular emphasis is made on values and fundamental principles of American political life, which are compared to those in Russia.

Keywords: *American studies, Russia, challenges of democracy, American values.*

REZUMAT. *Problema predării studiilor americane. O perspectivă rusească.* Acest articol abordează problema predării studiilor americane la nivel universitar. În atmosfera de anti-americanism ce caracterizează viața din Rusia contemporană, subiectul acesta capătă o semnificație deosebită, ca un mijloc eficient de educație a maselor pentru democrație. O astfel de abordare determină alegerea problematicii precum și metodologia. Autoarea discută atât provocările democrației americane cât și avantajele ei, așa cum se văd ele din Rusia. Un accent deosebit se pune pe valorile și principiile fundamentale ale vieții politice americane, care sunt comparate cu cele din Rusia.

Cuvinte cheie: *studii americane, Rusia, provocările democrației, valori americane.*

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Introduction

American studies appeared in the curricula of Russian universities after 1991, when political changes brought about new approaches to education. A review of the general situation in the next fifteen years or so in the sphere of teaching and research in American studies was given by Professor Olga Antsyferova of Ivanovo State University in central Russia. She outlined the activities of several centers for American studies in Russia, conferences and summer schools in American studies, mentioned the main publications and named major Russian Americanists. In her succinct conclusion she called the 1990s-2000s “an interparadigmatic period”, when traditional academic approach coexisted with new interdisciplinary attitudes (Antsyferova 2006). Since then new challenges have arisen, making the subject even more meaningful than ever before.

The Significance of American Studies in Russia Today

Today teaching American studies in Russia has acquired a huge political significance as a way to combat xenophobia and, particularly, anti-American phobia. After the annexation of the Crimea, the Russian government has been conducting a policy of self-isolation. The U.S. has been presented in the officially supported media as an arch-enemy, allegedly planning to destroy Russia. The United States and President Obama became targets of continuous attacks. The cumulative result of such policy is sad: according to Levada-Center opinion polls, negative attitude towards the United States expressed about 70% of Russians in 2014 and 2015, and between 66 % and 70% in 2016, a significant drop increase from 10 % in the early 1990s (cf. Gazeta.ru. August 2016).

In the atmosphere of anti-Americanism, it is imperative that Russian academics should use American studies not only to widen students' cultural horizons, but fight existing prejudices and phobias. At a time when the very idea of democracy is being deliberately and systematically compromised, the study of the U.S. may be an effective channel of educating people for democracy. From a Russian perspective, the importance of American studies now consists mainly in entrenching in students' minds fundamental values of liberty, equality in the law, popular representation, and human rights – values which, to use Ralph Waldo Emerson's phrase, “have no parallax” (Emerson 1888, 15).

Lecture courses on American studies traditionally include such topics as geography, population, political system, elections, political parties, and education. My experience of teaching the subject in Saint-Petersburg State University for over twenty years has led me to believe that a topical approach needs to be complemented by presenting the United States as a political system in evolution,

with a specific system of values and a way of life. Teaching American studies in Russia may increase the students' awareness of the fundamental principles of the American political system as well as its values. The facts about the U.S., when compared with facts and features of contemporary Russia, produce something of a shock for a Russian audience. Comparing the two ways of life, our students may reassess political and social phenomena at home; they can obtain a clearer picture of how far we, Russians, have veered from democratic principles entrenched in our constitution. The method of juxtaposition, both implicit and explicit, therefore, is an effective way of teaching the subject.

Challenges of American Democracy

While discussing challenges the U.S. has faced since its foundation, it seems pertinent to emphasize the idea of a difficult path to progress, both in social and political terms. America had to choose from various options, some of which could be presented as a set of alternatives:

- The “no faction” stance was taken by George Washington and James Madison in the early years of the American republic. In “Federalist No 10” Madison defines a faction as a number of citizens who are united “by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens”. He admitted that faction may be detrimental to “the aggregate interests of the community”. But its “mischiefs” can't be cured, since it will mean destroying liberty which “is essential to its existence” (Federalist 1961, p.78). This was apparently the reason, why the “no faction” stance was challenged by Thomas Jefferson. Since his time this, opposite view of the mechanism of renewal and change, took the form of party politics spelt large.
- The concept of a weak government, which dates to the times of the first U.S. Constitution (the Articles of Confederation) of 1781, came to be regarded as inadequate in conducting foreign policy. So, the idea of a strong federal government was envisaged in the Constitution of 1789. As James Madison put it in “Federalist No. 45”, “[t]he powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected” (The Federalist 1961, p.292). The significance of the “Federalist Papers” can't be overestimated in implementing the transition from a weak to a strong government;

- The famous saying attributed to Jefferson “That government is best which governs least” signifies one trend in American social thinking, which is associated with philosophical anarchism (Adler 2000, p.378); an opposite view of the role of state was represented by John Adams. Interestingly, American Transcendentalist Henry Thoreau expressed a sensibility supporting the above-mentioned motto, thus continuing the tradition of philosophical anarchism in American thought. In his “Civil Disobedience” he went even further when he said: “That government is best which governs not at all” (Thoreau 1993, p.1) In the 1780s the size of the government was still a debatable issue. Jefferson poignantly expressed it in his letter to William S. Smith on February 2nd, 1788: “We are now vibrating between too much and too little government, and the pendulum will rest finally in the middle” (Founders Online), which meant that he favored the limitation of government within proper bounds.
- Liberalism versus government regulation in economy (or, *laissez-faire* against protectionism) has been a much debated issue over the years. In the 1880s this alternative was formulated by William Sumner as a choice between two options: “equality & poverty” or “inequality & wealth”. This view, though, was challenged by socially oriented philosophers; the Social Darwinists of the time – William Sumner and John Fiske-- favored free trade, while Lester Ward thought it necessary to combine competition with protectionism. The conservatism of the former, in the words of Perry Miller, meant an obstinate belief “that only in a society where the struggle for survival is allowed to work itself out can there be freedom”. Lester Ward, however, belonged to a different camp. The interference of government was viewed differently by both philosophers. What seemed to Sumner “a blasphemy and an idiocy”, became for Ward “the end of human existence” (Miller, Perry 1961, p. xxvii, xxix). A debate along these lines is still continuing;
- The challenge of democracy lies in making difficult choices – “choices that inevitably bring important values into conflict” (Janda K., et al 1997, p.27-28). According to American scholars Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey Berry and Jerry Goldman, every government “infringes on individual freedom,” but the degree of the infringement depends on commitment to order and equality. So, government in the U.S. faces two dilemmas: one centers on the conflict between freedom and order, and the other focuses on the conflict between freedom and equality. In other words, the government has to choose between two opposite stances: a) freedom and a certain amount of disorder; b) order without freedom. The former is regarded by Americans as the only possible *modus vivendi*. Freedom of speech and

freedom of religion are cited as the top examples of America's supreme values compared to other places in the world (The Atlantic 2012). It is difficult to imagine that Americans could deliberately choose order at the cost of giving up freedom.

- Isolationism or globalization is the dilemma, especially pertinent to the policy of American government in the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This or that choice necessarily involved heated discussions in the political spheres and eventually determined the world's history. The same dilemma historically treated is discussed by John Moore and Jerry Pubantz. They contrast George Washington's and Woodrow Wilson's views of America's perception of its place in the world. Washington and the other founders, the scholars contend, believed that the United States would be active in the world, "but they sought to sustain the uniqueness of America by maintaining independence from the encumbrances and entanglements of international politics". Conversely, Woodrow Wilson "argued for an active internationalism ... for committing the United States to help make the world over in light of universal values". Washingtonian unilateralism (called sometimes "isolationism") dominated American foreign policy throughout nearly the entire nineteenth century. The Wilsonian tradition, in their words, "has held sway for most of the period since World War I" (Moore and Pubantz 1999, p.15). The election of President Trump, however, may put to a test what they called "Wilsonian tradition" in American life.

Understanding America

There are several aspects to focus on while discussing the fundamental principles of American life. Emphasis can be made on those which guarantee the working of the democratic system, particularly the division of powers, multi-party system, and free elections – all basic for understanding American political life.

The division of powers

A fundamental feature of the U.S. constitutional system is the division of political authority between two levels of government – state and national. This so to say, the "vertical" division allows the central government to deal with problems national in scope, while leaving the states free to handle matters of local concern. The rationality of such an arrangement seems obvious to an unprejudiced observer in Russia who can compare it to the dependence of local Russian authorities on the central power.

An even more important feature of American political life is the “horizontal” separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial branches. “The Separation of Powers devised by the framers of the Constitution was designed to do one primary thing: to prevent the majority from ruling with an iron fist. Based on their experience, the framers shied away from giving any branch of the new government too much power. The separation of powers provides a system of shared power known as checks and balances” (The U. S. Constitution Online). Conversely, a fusion of powers which can be witnessed in Russia has resulted from a gradual erosion of democratic principles entrenched in Russian Constitution of 1993. Dependence of the legislature and the courts on the presidential power is the reality today. Notoriously known is the pronouncement of a former speaker of the Russian parliament: “The Duma [the Parliament. – *E.O*] is not the place for discussions”. Once, Thomas Carlyle called the British Parliament “our National Palaver”. Our case is much worse: the Russian Duma of 2011-2016 belied its name (“duma” from “dumat”, i.e., “to think”) and virtually excluded discussion.

The division of powers in the U.S. can be viewed as the cornerstone of stability of American political structure. It comes as a surprise to our students that the U.S. President does not have the whole power. In fact, the House of Representatives controls spending and finance, “so the President *must* have its agreement for his proposals and programs” (Stevenson 1993, p.35). As the famous saying goes, “The President proposes, but the Congress disposes”. This simple statement conveys the idea that in America the head of the executive branch is not all-powerful. On the other hand, the U.S. Congress, which limits the power of the President, has never been a rubber stamp parliament.

The U.S. party system

American experts in party politics consider parties a powerful means of mobilizing citizens (Walker 1991, p.20); they are important intermediaries “capable of aggregating broad sets of interests and providing coherent leadership in the American setting” (Hershey 1995, p.13). Jeffrey M. Berry notes that parties in America “contribute to democratic government through the functions they perform for the **political system** – the set of interrelated institutions that link people with government” (Janda et al. 1997, p.249). He specifies their four functions as “nominating candidates for election to public office, structuring the voting choice in elections, proposing alternative government programs, and coordinating the actions of government officials” (Janda et al, p.249). Presenting the specifics of the U.S. party system to a class in American studies may enhance their knowledge of this particular aspect of democracy. Students may compare

it with what they know about the role of “the Party” in their own country, where the Communist party, which used to be officially called “the leading and driving force”, was the only existing party for about seven decades. The fact that in the United States the two major parties keep *alternating* in power both on the federal and state levels, is a proof of a democratic system. Another poignant difference is the fact that party life in the U.S. is not hinged on an imposed “ideology”, as was the case in the Soviet Union. It is important to note that this term has different implications in Russia and the U.S. In Russia it is understood as allegiance to an abstract idea (building communism; the dictatorship of proletariat). Though the Russian Constitution of 1993 proclaims ideological diversity, still, attempts to introduce an 'obligatory' ideology are now being made. Discussing American example, therefore, is quite pertinent. Instead of one dominant ideology, parties in the U.S. are pursuing concrete, though different, interests in the spheres of taxes, trade, immigration, defense, welfare, and environment. One of the crucial points of contention is spending money. “The differences in spending patterns reflect some real philosophical differences between the parties” (Janda et al. p.271). As to the core principles of American democracy, they have been kept intact.

Elections

Elections in the US as an instrument of democracy appear to be a fascinating topic for Russian students. What seems strange to a Russian is that Americans have to register for elections, whereas in Russia, with its low mobility and a deeply established institute of “propiska” (residence registration), people are automatically included in official lists for voting. What else is different is the system of counting votes. Whereas in the U.S. it is practically an automatic process, in Russia, it is the counting that matters, not the voting. Various sophisticated methods of achieving the desired result are used in this particular stage of the election process. Another specific – and very attractive – aspect of elections in the U.S. is pre-election debates, which are *sine qua non* for presidential and vice-presidential nominees. In Russia they are either optional or not considered obligatory for those who are nominated for top positions of state. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that in contemporary Russia, the principle of people's representation is not implemented. Elections have become a misnomer, since the final results are predetermined through rigging the process in its various stages. Discussion of American elections is thus instrumental to widening students' horizons by acquainting them with democratic practices abroad. Very impressive for the Russian eye seems people's fight for a wider participation of ethnic minorities and women in American elections. (See: Janda et al. 1997, p.211-245).

Knowledge of the above-mentioned aspects of American democratic system deepens students' understanding of America. Very helpful for realizing the similarities and differences between our countries is David Remnick's book "Resurrection. The Struggle for a New Russia" which analyzes events and sensibilities in post-communist Russia in the 1990s (Remnick 1997). The democratic constitution, new openness, implementation of 'glasnost', or, the freedom of the press, the freedom of meetings and demonstrations, as well as fair elections gave us hope. Gradually, this progressive trend stalled and a reverse process ensued, thus bringing to mind the atmosphere of pre-Gorbachov times. According to the latest Freedom House Report, "Russia's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the heavily flawed 2016 legislative election, which further excluded opposition forces from the political process" (Freedom House Report 2017). Russia's Freedom Status "Not Free" adequately describes the situation from which we can assess American institutions.

American Values

In addition to discussing fundamental principles on which American life is built, it is feasible to focus on values. Features characteristic of American life, in general, are self-reliance, inherent patriotism, religious tolerance, a combination of individualism and collectivism. They are different from those characteristics which are considered to be Russian national features, conditioned by a long history of subjugation and feudal dependence, be it in tsarist or communist times. Many Russians do not seem to protest against being forced to falsify election results. Some yield to being used, or, rather, misused in the so-called "carousels" during elections; others do not protest against being driven to organized public rallies, which are presented in the media as "mass" voluntary gatherings. Discussion of American values may help our students take a more critical look at our society with its high degree of hatred and aggressiveness in social life, its political infantilism, and conformism.

The fundamental concept of Liberty is an important aspect in a system of juxtapositions which requires discussion. One of the first and foremost values identified in the Declaration of Independence is freedom. It characterizes America as a country, whereas in Russia it is not duly valued. It is not surprising that in the country which liberated itself from the communist regime after seven decades of total oppression and disregard for personality, opinion polls show that freedom as a value is rated very low. According to an opinion poll taken in September 2013 by FOM (The Foundation of Public Opinion), 73% of Russians value stability more than liberty, and only for 16% liberty is a greater value (FOMnibus). This fact shows that we need to instill liberal thinking and respect for democratic principles in the

minds of young people. I usually quote the famous saying, attributed to Jefferson and many times repeated in the nineteenth century: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Its importance is stressed by the fact that it is carved on a granite pedestal at the entrance to the National Archive in Washington. It may have and it may have a base special meaning for us, Russians, as a warning and advice.

Self-reliance is known to stand very high on the list of American values. In its economic aspect, this feature of American character was shaped by the whole history of America. The concept of spiritual self-reliance formulated by William Ellery Channing, Ralph Emerson and Henry Thoreau is another facet of this sensibility. In contrast to the United States, in Russia, self-reliance is all but lacking; here the people are used to rely more on the authorities or on the "national leader" rather than on themselves. Decades of persecutions and mass repressions against individual entrepreneurs, peasants, and intellectuals have resulted in a radical psychological change. As a result, the country is reaping a sad harvest of the past. The teaching of American studies gives us a chance to talk about Henry Thoreau and Ralph Emerson and their views of self-reliance (Osipova 1985; Osipova 2001). Emerson's words from "Self-Reliance" "Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist" (Emerson, 1888, p.13), and Thoreau's statement from his famous essay "On Civil Disobedience" sound pertinent in Russia: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison... [It is] the only house in a slave state in which a free man can abide with honor." (Thoreau 1993, p.9). The Russian dissident movement was rooted in, and still gets sustenance from, the tradition of European and, particularly, American non-conformism. The names of Thoreau and Tolstoy are symbols of non-alignment with the government when it blatantly violates human rights.

Patriotism as it is manifested by Americans in official, public and private life seems a genuine expression of people's pride in their country. This sensibility may not exclude social or political criticism. An interesting comparison of Martin Luther King's patriotism and that of the conservative black pastor Henry Jackson is made by Sam Hitchmough. King's patriotism, he contends, "was a challenge to the consensual patriotism of the country, to liberate the best in the American creed and save the soul of America. Jackson's patriotism was pragmatic and conservative, a belief that the meanings within the Constitution and the American creed shouldn't be wrestled with, they should simply be respected and adhered to, and that all protest energies should be channeled through the existing system" (Hitchmough 2011). As we know, King's kind of patriotism turned to be historically right, but both co-existed in time. In other words, patriotism in the U.S. may assume various forms and shades. This is not the case, though, for contemporary Russia. The state, through its media, dictates what forms people's patriotism should take. Television propaganda equates xenophobia with an

expression of patriotism. Moreover, people who have different views from the officially declared are labeled 'unpatriotic', which often brings about reprisals. It should also be noted that a threat of terrorism in recent years has caused a certain slide towards a state imposed form of patriotism in the U.S. Also we must note that the recent developments in US politics during the last eight years point to a certain slide towards of a state imposed form of patriotism, such as the American citizens' obligation to report any act or person suspicious of terrorism).

Some Strategies in Teaching American Studies

Approaching such a complex subject as the United States in profile, we need to resort to different methods. Using comparative, historical and interdisciplinary methods of study, we draw facts and ideas from the fields of philosophy, history, sociology, political studies, and literature.

Russian Americanists need to give students a well-balanced view of the country whose language they study. It can be done by skillfully exposing lies constructed by ideologues in politics, journalism, and the church. The most harmful myths about America concern the U.S. role in World War II and its aid to Russia regarding the amount and significance of the Lend-Lease programs. The belief that America "has never helped Russia" is widely spread. Actually, the opposite is true, and it comes as a surprise to students. We can mention four episodes in the history of U.S.- Russia relations: aid during the 1895 famine, aid given by the American Relief Association (ARA) in 1920-21 and the famous Lend-Lease Programs during WWII, as well as aid given during the perestroika at the end of the 1980s and later, at the outbreak of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Now it seems heresy to remind people that soon after 1945, Stalin admitted that the USSR would have never won the war, had it not been for American help. Indeed, the amount and the very nomenclature of supplies defy the average Russians' imagination: airplanes and anti-aircraft guns, machine-guns and trucks (used as tugs), fuel and non-ferrous metals, aluminum and sheeted steel, powder and tanks, cargo vessels and locomotives, various cables and rails, railroad cars and radio stations, tractors and lathes and, of course, food. The very mention of facts and figures of aid given to us in the framework of Lend-Lease invariably produces a strong effect in the audience.

The present generation of Russians knows practically nothing about the role the U.S. played in WWII, from its war in the Pacific to the Arctic convoys and the Normandy landings. Highlight these events seems particularly important in creating a balanced image of our American ally in the Second World War.

There is still another misconception which needs to be discussed. The image of the U.S. as a country of sheer individualists – a familiar cliché of Soviet journalists - is currently popularized in the media. Not surprisingly, our

students find it hard to believe that collectivism is a feature of American daily life. The real picture of volunteerism - concrete examples of volunteer work - evokes students' admiration and comes as a surprise to those who have never had a chance to visit the United States. The role of people's solidarity is another aspect of collectivism in U.S. twentieth-century history. Episodes from the Civil Rights Movement illustrate the case: the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama and the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Birmingham, Alabama, when non-violent protesters were arrested and jailed. Many White people joined Blacks in their protests, working together with them in SNCC (Students Non-Violent Coordination Committee).

My emphasis on positive the lack of emphasis on positive aspects of American democracy may be accounted for by the fact that, in the public debate and the state-supported media in Russia, positive aspects of American life are tendentiously given small script or altogether neglected. In fact, teaching American studies includes such issues as the problem of slavery in the nineteenth century, the ugly face of racism in the twentieth and various instances of discrimination based on race, gender and class in the twenty-first. The criticism, though, is complemented by discussing the efforts American society is undertaking to set things right - through legislation, improving education, and widening the sphere of culture. Teaching the history of U.S. literature, as a part of an in-depth study of America, also gives ample opportunities to show how American authors addressed the problems of political corruption, manipulation of public opinion and conformism (or "mobocracy", in the words of Irving and Cooper). A rift between democratic ideals and realities of life features in the writings of American authors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Thoreau, Emerson, Cooper, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Bradbury, Vonnegut, Kesey, and Morrison, to mention just a few.

Teaching American studies as a review course in the framework of area studies has a different goal. I can't but agree with Rodica Mihaila in her assessment of the role of American studies in the former communist countries. It "has always dealt, more or less overtly, with a virtual America - a New World that has always existed as a challenge and a dream of fulfillment." American studies, as she put it, "is no longer an U.S. export but a national investment in democratic reforms" (Mihaila 2002). This is the case both with Romania and post-communist Russia. Yet now, even more than in the times of perestroika, or in the 1990s, the study of America helps Russian students accept democracy as a model of social and political life. It is particularly important now, when democratic principles are continuously derided in the official media and abusing the U.S. has become a part of political rhetoric.

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