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3. Area Studies Revisited

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AREA STUDIES REVISITED

» The George Bush administration created massive changes in the United States. Indeed, changes in America's relation to the world that preoccupied everyone's attention are foremost changes internal to the United States. These extreme and draconian shifts in policy acutely develop political and cultural forces and plans evident in the rightist capture of U.S. state power since the 1970s debacles around Jimmy Carter opened society to a political remaking that reactionary forces patiently, thoroughly, and ruthlessly recognized and achieved. Has American studies even yet grasped the brutal reach of this achievement? Has it adopted a new program adequate to a neoconservative and fundamentalist reaction? In this context, the question of whether or not American studies is, can, or should be formed as an area studies project brings us back to the question of the state.

In chapter 5, "Can American Studies Be 'Area Studies'?" I raise again the question of American studies' interest in the state and its propensity to interest itself in cultural affairs, in matters of civil society. I point out that the U.S. state is the prime consumer as well as founder of area studies knowledge. I also argue that the U.S. state has no need to buy the sort of cultural knowledge that American studies normally produces and that, indeed, the state would be relatively hostile to an American studies that took the state as its object and produced knowledge about or a theory of the U.S. state. In addition, the state has no need for such knowledge, since it more than adequately understands itself and has its own cadre of intellectuals.

Moreover, neoconservative Straussians hold, as a matter of basic principle, that rulers must lie and deceive, as must philosophers, for widespread knowledge of the state's methods and aims threaten to allow undesirable elements of society to gain state power. In other words, the Straussian extreme antidemocratic position obliges critical intellectuals to direct their attention to the state's ways of working, to overcome deflections to describe,

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analyze, and theorize the regime as a structure of domination and violence. Taking on such tasks requires setting aside much of the culturalist bias of recent work dealing with social movements, fractions, and representational struggles. Indeed, it demands a movement of self-critique to open several questions: have studies devoted to civil society been theoretically adequate? Have they occupied critical intellectuals on one terrain while state intellectuals elsewhere seized power? Have they enabled the reaction's seizure of power tactically and immediately by producing social fragments that became available to reactionary manipulation?

During the Clinton era, multiculturalism and globalization defined fields of work as if we could theorize civil society as external to the state and on the dual assumptions that the state is an undesirable political organization superseded by post-statist global regimes. During all this — decades or so that these topics kept our attentions — other intellectuals (some academic and some working for think tanks, foundations, or political organizations) developed plans to form permanent governments and to use state power to return not merely to the 1950s imaginary but also to pre-Enlightenment and predemocratic forms of thinking and politics. Mr. Justice Clarence Thomas's commitment to natural law as a criterion for American jurisprudence conveniently represents the quasi-religious turn given to the supposedly secular institutions of a revolutionary republican government. The extraordinary events around Anita Hill's accusations against Justice Thomas to some extent obscured the fundamental ideological reaction his nomination represented in American politics. Thomas's nomination not only cynically exploited racial and identity politics but also catered to the backlash white male vote by making cynical use of a "black man" who, having benefited from affirmative action, stood foursquare against it. The appointment typifies the new regime's politics and points to the dangers and areas for intellectual work.

While Thomas has no value as a thinker, his "subject position," his positionality, has both symbolic and real power. Real power comes from his holding to an antihistorical, largely religious, pre-Enlightenment legal philosophy, that is, natural law.

> The concept of "natural law" is central to the Western tradition of thought about morality, politics, and law. Although the Western tradition is not united around a single theoretical account of natural law, its principal architects and leading spokesmen — from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King — have shared a fundamental

> belief that humanly created "positive" law is morally good or bad — just or unjust — depending on its conformity to the standards of a "natural" (viz., moral) law that is no mere human creation. The natural law is, thus, a "higher" law, albeit a law that is in principle accessible to human reason and not dependent on (though entirely compatible with and, indeed, illumined by) divine revelation. St. Paul, for example, refers to a law "written on the heart" which informs the consciences even of the Gentiles who do not have the revealed law of Moses to guide them (Romans 2:14–15). Many centuries later, Thomas Jefferson appeals to "the law of nature and nature's God" in justifying the American Revolution.
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> The debate over "natural law," which goes back at least to the origins of Greek philosophy and biblical revelation, concerns the question of whether there are lasting standards higher than human will and opinion that have binding force on human beings in the conduct of their responsibilities. Reference to natural law is a reference to some form of principle or norm by which particular human laws can be judged either just or unjust, either good or bad. And, of course, natural law has to do with issues such as the proper limits of government, the appropriate balance between individual and institutional obligations, and the very nature of human freedom.[1]

These and other commentators who speak favorably on natural law philosophy as a basis for American jurisprudence give the notion genetic legitimacy. They trace it back to Aristotle, often through religious thinkers; taking Aquinas as its high mark, often invoking Richard Hooker; and, on occasion, troubling modern progressive secularists by invoking Lincoln and King as predecessors.

We need to make at least two points now: first, during the two decades or so when the posttheory publishing projects linked to multiculturalism, representative politics, and new social movements took civil society and cultural politics — to the exclusion of state politics — and were flourishing, reactionaries built the intellectual and discursive apparatus that made possible the seizure of state power. Second, these reactionaries seized state power on a program of anti-Enlightenment populist politics that publicly denounced rigorous forms of humanistic, historical, and scientific knowledge while at the same time thinking rigorously, lucidly, and openly about the real nature of U.S. society, its ideologemes, and the tactics required to seize control. In *The Education of Henry Adams,* Adams tells us Americans must study success. If we look at the reaction in power during the Bush administration, we see

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its intellectuals did not allow the culture wars to distract it from deciding to seize the state. Furthermore, they proceeded because of a solid Hegelian and Marxist analysis that understands the inherent relation between an inseparable state and civil society. They understood the politics of representation as the politics of social fragmentation that could be not only cynically absorbed and elaborated for their own purposes but also used to build a ruling coalition and, most important, a ruling national party remarkable for its reliance not on hegemony but on domination as a mode of rule. All the left "social movement" elements in American studies and allied academic practices that argued against the Enlightenment and liberalism and positioned themselves as antihegemonic have gotten what they wished for.

Understanding the full symbolic and political value Clarence Thomas represents for the current American regime requires considerably more discussion, but we can see how his views open an exploratory line of inquiry into the current American regime. The same regime, which seemingly cares nothing for historical knowledge of cultures and places like Iraq, aligns itself with the ahistoricism of natural law jurisprudence when many of the regime's leaders show the influence of Straussian antihistoricism. From this constellation of ideas and figures we can follow several lines of investigation into the regime's creation of knowledge-producing institutions that generated ways of speaking and policy directions that have brought civil society to serve the interests of a national party seizing state power.

If American studies were to become an alienated and critical form of area studies, it would need to change its fascination with civil society and the public sphere. It would need to abandon its antihegemonic desires and attend to how civil society, seen as value free and not an alternative to the state, but a means to state power, cannot be thought of except as a moment in the state. American studies can reshape itself as area studies if it gives the U.S. state proper attention, that is, realign its power as a structure or system to be described, analyzed, and judged — not assumed to be irrelevant, transparent, or an enemy. Such an alienated critical American studies would ask how the populist and pragmatist impulse of recent American studies orthodoxies stood in relation to the state and its populist seizure. It would have to ask if recent American studies' concerns with minoritarian and social movement struggles and interests adequately theorized with its own role in augmenting especially white male and white Christian resentment or produced a politically adequate theory of those resentful national elements that provide the reaction with an electoral base.

If the U.S. national state comes back to a central place in American studies work, then we must leave behind the critical romance with third-way notions of civil society. Emblematic of this romance, Anthony Giddens, Tony Blair's favorite intellectual, proposed a theory of global security capacious enough to include global/local realities, post-statist fantasies of nonviolent competition and cooperation, and a universal standard of human rights — all as the latest form of modernization. As the head of the London School of Economics (LSE), Giddens has supported several institutional initiatives, most prominently the Centre for Civil Society, which advocates civil society as a conceptual alternative to two-sector models that focus on the market and the state. "Society" itself becomes "civil society," and its study excludes the involvement of the market and the state in social life and action. Civil society is "between" and "made up of voluntary and non-profit organizations of many different kinds, philanthropic institutions, social and political movements, other forms of social participation and engagement and the values and cultural patterns associated with them."[2]

I hypothesize that this civil society concept has an American audience because it offers an opportunity to speak of human agency, the so-called empowerment of which underlies the decision of various pragmatist cultural approaches within representational academic politics. The LSE hopes to both understand and promote the legitimate independence of the elements of civil society to achieve a newly arranged hegemonic compromise with the powers of state and market. The U.S. example shows that civil society and the institutions of social participation have about them no meaningful progressive force or effect. In practical terms, the political reaction dominates civil society and uses its institutions to build domination, declaring war on enemies with whom it has no intent to compromise to form hegemony. The LSE's conceptual weakness stands out in placing civil society as a sphere with human agents interestedly involved in politics and economics. The sphere's independence from state and market are illusory and the power of its institutions to negotiate with the forces to each side and to elaborate values and culture depend upon a hegemonic state system that refrains from maximalizing its program by state domination. The antidemocratic, antihegemonic, and antimodern reaction emblematized by an alignment of natural law, Straussian ideology, the anti-intellectual population, and irrational fundamentalism sees no value in tolerating an independent civil society, making war on its institutions to deny their independence, swamping them

in unequal competition with well-financed alternatives (as think tanks are to universities), and cowing others into good behavior.

None of this should come as any surprise. The LSE's definition opens this way: "Civil society refers to the set of institutions, organizations, and behaviour situated between the state, the business world, and the family." In *The Philosophy of Right,* Hegel had also begun by writing that "civil society is the [stage of] difference which intervenes between the family and the state."[3] The LSE wants to admit independence from a free market as well, while for Hegel the immediate concern is the relation of the particular and universal. But Hegel's proffered analysis paints the problem that American studies as area studies will not avoid. Hegel goes on to say of civil society that "its formation follows later in time than that of the state because, as difference, it presupposes the state; to subsist itself, it must have the state before its eyes as something self-subsistent" (266). Moreover, how does civil society contain the state that preexists it? In the moment of freedom, as the rule of law and the protection of property, and in the moment of common as well as undivided interest by means of what Hegel calls "Public Authority." If the LSE on civil society and academic culturalist politics have something in common, it is underestimating the inseparability from the state, which must subsist and subtend culture and society. If American studies emerges as an alienated area studies it will be to see the state and its coercion everywhere and to develop critique of its operations as well as policies for shaking its power free of the reaction's premodern, antihistoricist, and antidemocratic grasp. The American reaction during the Bush era unsheathed the sword of coercion at home as a condition for daring so abroad and used the devices of civil society not to gain the legitimating consent of the governed but as weapons, as extensions of coercion to perpetuate itself as an antidemocratic regime by closing down all possible venues for dissenting, thinking, and politics. What Al Capone said is true: "You will get more done with a kind word and a gun than with a kind word alone." The maximalist fantasy of permanent reaction dreamed of the day when neither would be necessary but, during the Bush era, disdained the kind word as weakness. American studies would do well to begin from Admiral Mahan's study of the American state as an independent agent drawing on the national economy for its own ends. Challenges to that notion depend on taking it seriously and weighing the need to do extensive rigorous scholarship that can realistically make other political arrangements possible.