

BOOK REVIEW

## BOOK OF AMERICA

Stipe Grgas, *Američki studiji danas: identitet, kapital, spacijalnost (American Studies Today: Identity, Capital, Spatiality)*. Zagreb: Meandar Media. 2014, 382 pp.

In order to understand why Stipe Grgas' latest book, *American Studies Today: Identity, Capital, Spatiality* (2014), represents an event for Croatian and regional American Studies—that is, for those who can read Croatian—it is necessary to outline briefly the context in which it appeared. Grgas has been the chair of American Studies at the Zagreb Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences since 2005, and the president of national and regional Americanist associations since their (recent) inception, so we should begin with some history of the discipline. The beginnings of American Studies in Croatia (a country that was at the time a federal republic of socialist Yugoslavia) can be traced to the years immediately following the Second World War. In her overview of local American Studies history, Jelena Šesnić contends that “the period from 1945–1985 was a period of the unconscious, non-institutionalized pursuit of American subjects without a clearly articulated frame or models of analysis” (Šesnić). However, the 1980s (a decade to which Grgas assigns a central place in the constitution of the present moment) saw not only the founding of the American Studies chair at the Zagreb Faculty of Philosophy, but also the establishing of the American Studies seminar, taught jointly by Yugoslav and

American professors at the Inter-University Center in Dubrovnik. As Šesnić shows, and the seminar programs and syllabi confirm, Croatian and Yugoslav American Studies were at the time communicating with contemporary disciplinary currents in the US, and were also in regular contact and cooperation with a number of American universities. It is ironic, and likely a symptom of changing American priorities, that such institutional bonds were stronger in the now deplored Yugoslav and socialist times than today, when “international cooperation,” “mobility” and “networking” are promoted as the core values of the reformed, market-oriented university. But this is indicative of the break shaping our present. The war in Croatia marked the “first major rupture for American studies in more recent Croatian history,” after which the discipline did “resume its course,” but “wasn’t quite the same any longer” (Šesnić). This change had to do, on one hand, with the generalization of nation-building prerogatives across the social field in Croatia and all other post-Yugoslav states, and on the other with the world-historical event of the demise of socialism, which brought with it the uncontested view of “the final supremacy of capitalism.” In the post-socialist world, “the domain of the economy [was] no longer disputable” (Šesnić).

These introductory remarks are meant to help situate Grgas' book within disciplinary and historical developments, which simultaneously create the conditions for the kind of thinking at work in the book, and become one of its key subjects. This not only relates to the work's dispute with the economy, or its critique of “celebrations of capitalism as a presumably natural way of production of life” (Grgas 2014: 128), but also to the reflexivity of Grgas' thought, and

his preoccupation with the positionality of an American Studies scholar. This reflexivity might be the book's first lesson for other non-US (or, more narrowly, post-Yugoslav) practitioners of the discipline. The lesson could begin by noting that *American Studies Today* enables us to articulate the process of nation-building to the process of capital accumulation, two processes, as Šesnić suggests, that have shaped both our disciplinary and national histories. When recognizing the potential to productively expand on Grgas' work, one can't help but wonder what would be left of, for instance, Croatian national identity, if it underwent the kind of critical scrutiny America is submitted to in this book, a possibility Grgas mentions several times. Surely, Grgas' is primarily a book on America (perhaps the only one fully deserving such a title in our culture), but its scope goes beyond the boundaries of one nation. The reasons for this relate both to America—the author's main subject—and capital, his methodological entry point.

Let us begin with the book's main argument, in which these two terms are articulated. Grgas argues, and convincingly demonstrates, that the United States is an exemplary capitalist nation, but one unwilling to speak the truth about its fundamental material processes. This book is about "thinking through the paradox that the exemplary capitalist society [the US] omits capital from its self-representations" (Grgas 2014: 20). The discipline of American Studies, an indispensable part of these self-representations, has participated in the concealment of capital as the "structuring core" of the United States, even as it rethought and reinvented its original preoccupation with "the question of the nation" (Grgas 2014: 48) on identitarian, post-national, trans-national, and other

grounds. Grgas argues that the economic crisis of 2008 showed that what was left undisputed in these disciplinary turns was always central to the American experience. In the contemporary conjuncture, marked by an economic catastrophe that began in the US but affected the world, the task of American Studies is "to reinscribe capital in the object of American Studies" (Grgas 2014: 20). Through the eighteen chapters of his book, dedicated to the topics of time, space (land and sea), money, race, technology, war, imperialism, labor and literature, Grgas does precisely that, confronting these vast topics by foregrounding the workings of capital in their constitution within the American experience and American Studies. This should not be taken to imply the total conflation of America and capital; rather, this work is about the formative power of capital within specific spatial and temporal boundaries. The result of this seemingly simple analytic move is rewarding, as it enriches and deepens our understanding of the cultural specificities of the United States, such as its structuring of time and space, the workings of race, and its geopolitical advances.

Grgas is aware of the previous marginalization of the economic sphere in his previous Americanist work (he often refers to his first Americanist book, *Ispisivanje prostora*, written in 2000). This time, it is the conjunctural pressures—namely the disastrous consequences of a US-centered and globally present financialized capitalism—that guide his research and effect a retrospective, revisionist look at the state of the discipline. Forging alliances on the margins of, or entirely outside, the disciplinary canon, Grgas argues for a shift of focus: "instead of concentrating on culture [...]"

and politics of identity, our attention should be directed towards the economic determinant of human life" (2014: 34). This implies "recognizing the absence of the [economic] sphere in extant disciplinary paradigms, and the revising of methodological premises in order to include it in the research agenda" (Grgas 2014: 42). When Grgas explains the reasons for the elision of capital from the subject of American Studies, we encounter a series of usual suspects. First, the lack of a properly Marxist tradition has long been recognized as a constitutive feature of the discipline (here Grgas relies on Michael Denning's influential work). The second reason might be termed the fetish of difference in the discipline: its insistence on heterogeneity, diversity, and engagement in identity politics. The latter reason should be viewed in the context of the social turbulence of the 1960s, and in relation to the "postmodern" linguistic and cultural turns (the US is at one point labeled "the exemplary embodiment of postmodernity" [Grgas 2014: 66]), or the "poststructuralist orthodoxy" that transforms everything into discourse (Grgas 2014: 42). Grgas recognizes that Americanist paradigm shifts always took place in response to the changing demands of the contemporary moment. The fact that the otherwise always politically-driven American Studies should not adequately reconfigure its priorities in the face of the present conjuncture testifies to the overwhelming power of what Paul Smith calls America's "primitive" dedication to the processes of capital accumulation. Grgas, focusing on the "the blind spot of the discipline," insists that the disciplinary elision is not merely a discursive one, but is rooted in socio-political practice (Grgas 2014: 42). The invisibility of capital is therefore testa-

ment to an ideological triumph, and to the fact that the commonsensical status of capitalist imagination in the US is part of a political project as well as a general, universalizing historical development. Grgas situates this political project in the 1980s, and identifies it with the rise of neoliberalism and financialization, whose "explanatory antecedent" he locates in the Gilded Age (2014: 134)—another moment marked by unrestrained capitalism and the rise of finance. But the constitution of America by capital is, according to Grgas, a more fundamental matter, which should be traced back to the colonization of the New World: the American project is "intertwined with the development of Western-European capitalism, [...] and [...] embodies the logic of the historical development of capitalism" (2014: 134).

This makes it apparent that Grgas takes a macroscopic view of America, which goes against dominant US disciplinary and ideological currents. Such a view can be regarded as a consequence of the author's outsider position; that is, to the fact that this is the work of a non-American Americanist. American Studies scholars working in the US can offer highly specialized but ever more fragmented accounts of their subject matter(s), bringing to light a host of (often ethnographic) details about the lived experience of the United States. However, the conditions for such a close reading of America are unavailable to those working outside the US. Grgas' work demonstrates that, faced with such limitations, productive comfort can be found in the privilege of a view from the periphery, which targets the totality of the United States, and which can be lost in the US practice of American Studies. Others have already noted that those Americanists "outside of [specifically

American] ideological pressure" are positioned so as to be able to "conduct the research our colleagues cannot" (Shapiro 2006: 32). This is, in part, the task Grgas set for this book.

The author's methodological premises result in curious reconfigurations of the disciplinary canon. Namely, Grgas' attempt to think the totality of the US leads to a re-evaluation of the early practitioners of American Studies—those who have been marginalized in an incessant series of scholarly twists and turns. Here I have in mind Grgas' constant critical returns to some of the insights of the Myth and Symbol school. The point of such returns is not to accept unproblematically the school's premises, but to appropriate them for Grgas' own analytical work. One reason for the author's apparent affinity for this disciplinary paradigm—apart from the "retentive power of myths" he registers in different spheres of contemporary American experience—is the "holistic understanding of American identity" he ascribes to Myth and Symbol authors (Grgas 2014: 21). In other words, a revisionist look at such "holism," which puts American exceptionalism in the service of capital, finds its rightful place in Grgas' project of grasping the "totality of the American problematic" (Grgas 2014: 22). It is only by constructing such a macroscopic approach that the workings of capital as the "structuring core of the American experience" can be unconcealed. As Grgas argues, those American Studies that insist on particular subjugated subjects and focus on issues of cultural heterogeneity and difference can easily lose sight of what appears in his "leftist ontology" (Grgas 2014: 23) as the "material being" of America (Grgas 2014: 130). Unsurprisingly, the New Americanists, whose central preoccupation was "the

incorporation of the question of identity in the American project, i.e. the recognition of the heterogeneity of US society," generally take a back seat here (Grgas 2014: 277). On the other hand, frequent references to Alan Trachtenberg aim to recover the work of an Americanist neglected, in Grgas' view, because of his primary interest in capitalism rather than the hegemonic paradigm of identity. If we note that the concept of identity is very much present in Grgas' study, we realize its use is virtually restricted to the "national identity" of the US, whereas the implicitly criticized identity paradigm implies an analytic insistence on various manifestations of difference. The so-called "transnational turn" in American Studies is also submitted to critical re-examination, with emphasis on the unevenness of the global space and the varying degrees of sovereignty nation-states can claim within it. This is particularly evident in the chapters on globalization and imperialism, and militarism and war.

It would be impossible to cover here all the aspects of America Grgas touches upon in this carefully composed book, but one example can perhaps serve as an illustration of his method of accumulation and articulation. The book's first chapter is dedicated to what Grgas terms the American "now." The US is described as the center of a "totalizing tendency" to impose on the rest of the world a "peculiar temporality" or "the American model of living in time," characterized by a short historical memory. The current "now" can thus be defined in relation to the 1980s, as the period that inaugurates the defining features of the present moment. These insights into "the sovereignty of the now" structuring American temporality are central to the argument developed in

the chapter on financialization, and to an understanding of how the 2008 financial crisis—in many ways the epicenter of the book—represented a deeply American phenomenon, whose Americanness is fundamentally informed by the logic of capital.

This book illustrates Grgas' contention that the pressures of the present conjuncture create the need for a "measure of postdisciplinary eclecticism" (Grgas 2014: 40). The range of types of knowledge put to work in this study is wide, and we can only regret the unfortunate decision of the editor not to equip the book with an index. Readers of *American Studies Today* should be aware that, although Grgas' move across disciplines implies an opening towards both the economy and economics, the type of knowledge involved in this operation is more significantly philosophical. This is not only apparent in recurrent references to William Spanos, whose "unconcealment" is one of Grgas' central terms, although an appropriated one. In fact, Karl Marx, whose thought looms large over Grgas' Americanist interventions, is understood and read primarily as a philosopher (Grgas 2014: 328–329). Grgas relies on Kojin Karatani as he renounces a "reductive" reading of Marx, which equates capitalism with its economic infrastructure. Grgas's Marx "thinks capital as an enchanted entity that occludes efforts at a rationalist analysis" (Grgas 2014: 330). Along with Karatani, Derrida, and Ozren Žunec, Grgas moves in the direction of an ontology of capital, wherein human lives and wills figure as incidents in an ultimately unrepresentable and uncontrollable movement of what is at various points described as a specter, monstrosity, permanent permutation, and the no-thing and not-being of capital. I insist on this because it is only

by admitting philosophy into American Studies that we can understand Grgas' statements such as that the US "does not let begin be" (Grgas 2014: 305).

Despite its manifold disciplinary concerns and general philosophical disposition, this is a readable and enjoyable book. Many episodes from everyday life, politics, history, and fiction contribute to the fact that after a couple of chapters, as the analytical framework folds into the story of the United States, readers can easily forget that this is a book about American Studies, and find themselves holding in their hands a book about America. But this image of America is far from nation-centric or "exceptionalist". The chapter on US militarism especially shows the expansive logic of Grgas' analysis, by which the "totalizing tendency" of the US carries with it the expansion of the analytic horizon. When telling the story of the island of Diego Garcia, described as an outpost of an empire essentially fueled by financial capital, he ends up with a rather dystopian picture of the world. In other words, although beginning with and in the US, the world is the ultimate horizon of Grgas' version of critical American Studies. The pessimism of Grgas' thought—he uses T.J. Clark's "left with no future" to describe his position—would probably be alien to those practitioners of the discipline always on the lookout for "agency" (a concept for which Croatian, along with many other languages, does not have a word). It is debatable as to whether the un-American pessimism of *American Studies Today* is a consequence of the actual total structural determination of life by capital, or of the debt Grgas pays to the pressures and limitations of the current conjuncture.

The interweaving of disciplinary themes and methodological problems

in this review is testament to the extent to which the book communicates with, and points to, a wide range of disciplinary and trans-disciplinary problems; the former because Grgas comes and starts from the confines of the American Studies discipline, and the latter because the discipline needs to overstep its boundaries to deal with the epistemological burden of the present. The fact that even the 2008 global catastrophe did not sway prevailing economic orthodoxies and policies shows the power of the ruling ideology, which reduces every sphere of human life to a market transaction. That the world ended but capitalism kept marching on, zombie-like, also proves to Grgas the impossibility of overcoming it. Still, the book lives up to its promise "to reinscribe capital in the object of American Studies" (Grgas 2014: 20), and therefore also represents the evidence of possibility. Grgas manages to show not only that his initial thesis is persuasive, but also that such reinscription can be immensely epistemically productive. It is on this level that the author shines the light of, dare I write, hope on his pessimistic account of the "now." If it is true, as Grgas writes, that there is no way out or alternative to the command

of capital, the same situation provides a host of material for a productive and imaginative Marxian epistemology. The "leftist ontology" to which Grgas subscribes has thus been vindicated and recovered for the future, whatever that future might bring.

Sven Cvek

#### WORKS CITED

- Grgas, Stipe. 2000. *Ispisivanje prostora: čitanje suvremenog američkog romana*. Zagreb: Naklada MD.
- Grgas, Stipe. 2014. *Američki studiji danas: identitet, kapital, specijalnost*. Zagreb: Meandar Media.
- Shapiro, Steven. 2006. "World-Systeming American Studies". *Review of International American Studies* 1,1: 29–33.
- Smith, Paul. 2007. *Primitive America: The Ideology of Capitalist Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Šesnić, Jelena. 2011. "Doing American Studies in Croatia: What Have We Done, Where Do We Go from Here?" *Croatian Association for American Studies*. Web. 1 Feb 2016.