

**EUROPEAN STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES:  
CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS  
FOR THE FUTURE**

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1 - EUROPEAN STUDIES TODAY

The future of European Studies in the United States is certainly dim, if one presumes that it will parallel the declining importance of “old, tired Europe” for the United States, and for American foreign policy more specifically.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, it could be viewed in a more positive light if one emphasizes the lasting legacy of the European enlightenment for the United States and for world culture, even while China and India are gaining in global importance. But more nuanced conclusions can be drawn by analyzing where knowledge about Europe is produced in the United States, by whom, and with what support. Adopting a sociology-of-knowledge approach to the question of the future of European Studies requires focusing also on the professional associations concerned with the study of Europe, its languages and cultures, such as the Council for European Studies (CES). Although the necessary data is often missing, this short essay, which expands upon a talk given to European colleagues at Science Po in June 2007, provides elements of reflection that could perhaps feed a more systematic analysis in the future.

Historically, the field of European studies has had a strong presence in American higher education because on this side of the Atlantic, “becoming educated” has always meant in part acquiring knowledge about Europe and the world of high culture that it represented. With the democratization of higher education and the growth of the professions and more technical specializations,

references to Europe became less central, but remained an essential component of the core curriculum. To this day, respectable universities are required to offer a sizable number of courses in European politics and history, as well as a standard set of courses in European languages of literature. These courses remain the bread and butter of European Studies in the United States – the key to its demographic renewal. Despite this relatively strong base, the field itself never became highly institutionalized, at least when compared to the major social science disciplines. While the professional associations of anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is only in 1970 that the Council for European Studies, the professional association of American scholars working on Europe, was created. Then a consortium of universities, the organization was supported by the Ford Foundation, with the goal of providing resources essential for the development of the field.<sup>2</sup> As the Ford Foundation phased out its support, the German Marshall Fund stepped in to fund the Council's activities, as well as its research fellowships and research working groups. It continues to provide generous support for the Council's international conference of Europeanists, which to this day continues to assemble students of Europe on a biannual basis. The 16th conference was held in Chicago in March 2008 and attracted several hundred participants from a range of disciplines. Thus, in these various roles, the Council continues to be one of the main institutional bases of the field.

Other crucial institutional bases for the field of European Studies are the universities that support the teaching and research infrastructure through area-based centers – at Harvard, UCLA, UC-Berkeley, and Michigan for example. These bring together faculty members and graduate and undergraduate students by offering courses, sponsoring conferences, workshops, and regular colloquium series, and as well as travel and graduate research. Some European governments have subsidized university-based centers of excellence that stimulated research and teaching related to a specific country – the German Government, and to a lesser extent, the French Government followed this strategy. There are also strong country-specific centers on particular campuses (France at New York University and Germany at the University of Michigan, for instance).<sup>3</sup>

European studies remains better represented, and better funded, in older and more elite research universities. Unfortunately, it is often very difficult for students from less well-endowed institutions to find the support they need to pursue their interest in the study of Europe – this is reflected (*inter alia*) in the pool of applicants for the pre-dissertation fellowships competition organized annually by the Council for European Studies. This situation is particularly worrisome in the context of accelerated globalization. To make more courses on Europe available to undergraduates who are attending non-elite institutions should be a top priority for funders and organizations concerned with the United States' ability to cope with the challenges that are ahead of us – both domestically and internationally. In particular, through courses on Europe, our youth need to continue to be exposed to different ways of organizing societies, as European welfare states have adopted alternative models for dealing with the reduction of poverty, growing inequality, and the challenges raised by growing diversity and racial heterogeneity.

In recent years, more uncertainty for the support of research on Europe has resulted from the elimination of the German Marshall Fund's fellowships program that supported sabbatical leave for faculty engaged in research. There are still funds available for pre-dissertation and dissertation research, particularly through the support of the Mellon Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. But the situation has become far more challenging for faculty members (and especially junior faculty). The decline in research funds available contribute to making European Studies a less attractive field of specialization for future generations of American academics.

To put the situation in an even broader perspective, it is important to note that the field of European Studies has been affected by the fate of area studies in general, and by their institutional position within universities. Prior to the eighties, experts on Africa, China, Japan, the Middle East, East European societies and the Soviet went about producing highly specialized knowledge on a range of societies and regions – which knowledge required deep familiarity with the area, detailed contextual analyses as well as extensive language training. In the seventies and eighties, area studies experts came under criticism for being too descriptive and not contributing sufficiently to the theoretical and explanatory knowledge most valued by many social scientists. Just at a time when the United States needed more

in-depth understanding of other societies – of the Middle East for instance, area experts were asked to more systematically explain the intellectual and social significance of their research. After having benefitted from considerable support from foundations, such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, in previous decades, areas studies became more peripheral to their agenda in the eighties – at the time when such funders became more interested in intervening on social problems.<sup>4</sup> Even within foundation more oriented toward scholarly pursuit (such as the Social Science Research Council), the ideal proposal came to be defined addressing through detailed empirical study broader theoretical questions (“what is your case study a case of?” – in the case of the International Dissertation Field Research Competition), instead of considering the knowledge of a society as a goal in itself. This transition away from descriptive knowledge occurred not only in European Studies, but also in areas such as Middle Eastern, African, and Asian Studies, which certainly affected the fate of European Studies, and the internal dynamic of disciplines such as political science, where many area experts were located.<sup>5</sup>

This transition led to greater interdisciplinarity among European Studies scholars, as significance came to be defined in part by how a proposal addressed topics of importance to non-experts. Nevertheless, to this day, the extent to which historians, political scientists, and others collaborate varies considerably across universities. While on some campuses European studies experts have close relationship with French studies, in others, Germanists or British experts are more central. Variations in the local disciplinary ecology depend on interpersonal relationship (affinities, personalities), institutional structures, and the availability of external resources that would foster collaboration among faculty.

In this context, how does French studies fare? Relatively well – at least compared to the study of other European societies. American historians of France had benefitted from, and contributed to, a strong tradition of theoretically-informed social science scholarship grounded in the *École des Annales* and located at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. This tradition was kept alive through strong ties between American and French historians and social scientists, fostered by regular exchanges (notably between the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes* and the Department of History at

Princeton University). There remains a large contingent of French experts who teach about France mostly in history, literature, and government departments. This community has been able to support two journals for a number of years, *French Historical Studies* and *French Culture, Politics, and Societies*. Whether these strengths can be maintained at a time when world history and other parts of the globe are attracting more attention remains to be seen. That a growing number of undergraduate students are learning Spanish, instead of French, does not help the situation. As is the case in German departments, French departments are responding by developing the study of civilization and culture, and by promoting cultural studies, which provides a frame for teaching a larger number of courses about film, popular culture, music, and technology. Romance Language and Literature departments also turn toward the study of the “francophonie” and of post-colonial literature, which is becoming a point of convergence among top departments. The decline in the popularity of the European languages is undoubtedly tied to deep transformations within American higher education. Today’s students are increasingly turning their attention away from French and German, and toward Chinese, Spanish, and toward Africa, India, and Asia. While between 1960 and 2002, the number of US college enrollment jumped from 3,700,000 to 15,600,000 students, the number of students learning French decreased from 228,000 to 200,000. The decline was even steeper for German (From 146,000 to 91,000). In contrast, Spanish jumped from 178,000 to 746,000, Chinese from 1,844 to 34,000 and Arabic from 541 to 10,000.<sup>6</sup> With the steady immigration from Mexico and the growing relevance of Latin America to US society and politics, the attraction of Spanish for the undergraduate population is unlikely to decline. For their part, Asian-American students often use their college years to deepen their knowledge of their culture of origin. At Harvard, progressive students increasingly focus on developmental and public health issues in the Global South, instead of reading European neo-Marxists, as was the case for their counterpart in the earlier decades.

## 2 - WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE DISCIPLINES?

Political scientists have traditionally represented the largest proportion of Europeanists across all disciplines within the Council for European Studies.<sup>7</sup> After all, comparative politics is one of the four core areas of the field. European politics looms very large within

comparative politics, as political development, welfare state building, and a wide range of other topics take Europe as the paradigmatic case against which other cases are to be measured. Nevertheless, in recent years, comparative politics has often been described as being “in crisis” within political science. Students who chose to become area specialists or comparativists often face an upward battle as the number of academic jobs available in these areas is rumored to be in decline. Scholars have been moving away from single country studies to focus on comparison and develop typology. The tradition of comparative historical scholarship inspired by Barrington Moore and others has come under attack and qualitative researchers are asked to meet standards of quantitative research.<sup>8</sup> Scholars who are not using quantitative data-sets are criticized for producing “just-so” stories, while formal theory is gaining in influence. However, there has been a growing interest in the European Union and related topics (European identity, European institutions, inequality or mobility within Europe, etc).

While political science remains central to European Studies, we have seen important developments within anthropology. The Society for the Anthropology of Europe was created in 1986 as a section of the American Anthropological Association. This organization provides a stable structure to anthropologists working on Europe, as it supports sessions within professional meetings and a range of other activities. The anthropology of Europe remains a relatively low-status specialty within anthropology, especially when compared to research conducted in other geographical areas more central to the great tradition of social and cultural anthropology (Papua-New Guinea, Australia, North Africa, etc.). Filling positions in the “classic” areas is often more of a priority for departments, including for the “big four” that produce the largest number of PhDs (the University of Chicago, UC-Berkeley, Columbia University, and the University of Michigan). Nevertheless, the anthropology of Europe is a growing and dynamic field, as the generation of pioneers (that of Susan Gal, Michael Herzfeld, Paul Rabinow, and others) has trained a large cohort of younger scholars who are now receiving tenure in a range of departments.

Within sociology, researchers do not group themselves based on their geographic area of specialty. Instead, they are organized around sections of the American Sociological Association that are designated by their substantive foci of research. Scholars working on Europe tend to assemble under the aegis of the section for Comparative Historical Sociology, which has traditionally been relatively Europe-focused (as indicated by the centrality of Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, and their students in the section leadership). There are other umbrella organizations, such as the Comparative Sociology Section of the International Sociological Association. In this context, sociologists working on Europe tend to have a weak identity as Europeanists. Moreover, courses on the sociology of Europe are extremely rare in the United States, although Europe is a constant referent in courses on topics such as social movements, inequality, political sociology, and cultural sociology. While the number of sociologists who work on Europe remain small, it is a strong group that has produced a number of disciplinary leaders. Nevertheless, there is a clear movement away from Europe, as sociologists also turn their attention toward post-colonialism and toward other areas of the globe.<sup>9</sup>

For its part, the history of Europe remains a very large field. Thus, it is not surprising that the relative number of dissertations written on Europe over the last decades dwarfs that of other disciplines. For instance, while in 2003, 161 dissertations on European topics were defended by historians, it was the case for only 72 political scientists, 33 anthropologists, 23 sociologists, and 11 economists (these figures resemble overall trends for the previous two decades).<sup>10</sup> Most departments of history have several European historians who specialize in a various periods and country histories. Survey courses on European history often are part of their bread and butter. History itself remains a very healthy discipline, in part because universities often continue to require that undergraduates take history courses as part of the core curriculum. However, historians are often not centrally involved in Europeanist networks, and within the Council for European Studies, in part because they tend to think of themselves as experts of a specific country and a specific period, and to have other historians as their primary community of reference. Moreover, their research is less often motivated by the broader theoretical questions that drive political scientists and sociologists,

which could act as bases for shared interdisciplinarity cognitive platforms. Within history departments, there is also a movement toward putting greater emphasis on world history, and a concern for hiring non-Western experts to insure a full coverage of courses concerning all the regions of the globe. This weakens the overall importance of Europe as a topic of interest, although the post-colonialism often looms large in the study of other regions, and it requires considering Europe in its relations to these regions.

### 3 - THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES

Despite this mixed diagnosis of the state of European Studies across the disciplines, my overall assessment is that European Studies remains a healthy field that attracts many talented and high-quality scholars. This is confirmed repeatedly at the bi-annual conference of the Council for European Studies, where participants generally value highly the papers and intellectual exchanges occasioned by this conference. Students of Europe are captivated by a wide range of burning issues and devote tremendous energy to studying them. Trans-nationalism and immigration are among them – unsurprisingly, given the ever-increasing movement of people, goods, and cultural artifacts across national boundaries. Poverty, social solidarity, and social exclusion are also important topics, as European societies continue to be perceived as an alternative to the market-driven American model of what may define a successful society.<sup>11</sup> Processes of identity formation at the national, regional, and European levels, are topics that bring together scholars from several disciplines who engage in intense debates and exchanges – anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and increasingly, political scientists. Economists and policy experts are also looking to Europe to address many practical questions pertaining to social problems. Moreover, the European Union commands much attention and the European Union Studies Association, plays a crucial role in supporting research on this topic. Although the intellectual enthusiasm and energy is palpable, resources to support research are diminishing (notably research fellowship and tenure-track positions). Current changes with American higher education are not always favorable to the social sciences, especially given the turn toward more technical and pre-professional specialization and the growing subordination of scholarship to the profit motive documented by sociologists of higher education.<sup>12</sup>



In this context, the Council for European Studies has an important role to play, as the learned society whose role it is to promote the field. The main activity of the Council has been to organize a bi-annual international conference that assembles European and American scholars working on Europe. Much more could be done – for instance, by promoting the teaching of Europe in high school social studies classes, at a time when American children appear to know less and less about other societies and ways of life. Working toward connecting European experts with American journalists should also be a priority, as this could improve the understanding that many Americans have of European societies.

The fragility of European Studies in the United States is especially worrisome given an international context where the American Government is looking to developing strong relationships with partners in other regions of the world. For several years, there has also been an increase of anti-Americanism in Europe, and greater skepticism about European societies in the United States media. We need to insure that the institutional strengths of European studies continue to make this area of specialization an attractive path for talented academics. CES needs to encourage the creation of more fellowships to support the work of scholars. The GMF fellowships that have supported the writing of many books on Europe have yet to be replaced. We also need to multiply sources of funding beyond the German Marshall Fund, in order to support more collaborative projects and substantive networks, and to create partnerships with European higher education organizations. The moment could be favorable given that European universities are often looking toward the United States in the context of the reform of its higher education engaged by the Bologna process.

## NOTES

- [1] For a recent rendition of this argument, which builds on David Rumsfeld's vision of Europe, see John Mearsheimer. 2008. "Europe and America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Presented at the 16th International Conference of the Council for European Studies, March 6<sup>th</sup>, Chicago.
- [2] An account of this history is provided by George Ross, former Chair of CES, in George Ross, 1995. "Celebrating CES Birthday." *European Studies Newsletter* 24 (no. 5/6), Pp. 2-5.

- [3] On this and other points, see various reports on European Studies produced in recent decades, such as Sidney Tarrow, 1993. "Rebirth or Stagnation: European Studies after 1989. Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund of the United States; Peter A. Hall. 1996. "The State of European Studies." New York: Social Science Research Council and Council for European Studies; and Christopher J. Makins. 1996. *The Study of Europe in the United States.* Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States. See also the discussion of this report in the *Journal of Common Market Study*, 2005. Volume 43, Issue 3. A paper by John Keeler in this issue addresses the specific case of European Union studies ("Mapping EU Studies: The Evolution from Boutique to Boom Field, 1960-2001", pp. 551-555.)
- [4] According to Jay Gabler, the sum of area studies faculty represent between 1 percent and 2 percent of total American faculty across the century. Area studies peaked in mid-century, with a modest decline in the later decades of the century (personal communication). On the transformation of the curriculum throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, See David John Frank and Jay Gabler. 2006. *Reconstructing the University: Worldwide Shifts in Academia in the 20th Century.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [5] There is a large literature on the transformation of area studies. See for instance Vincente L. Rafael. 1994. "The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States." *Social Text* 41: 91-111.
- [6] I thank Peter A. Hall and Patricia Craig for making these figures available to me. Source: Modern Language Association.
- [7] For a detailed comparison of the representation of various disciplines within European Studies, see Peter A. Hall (*op. cit.*)
- [8] For a description of changes within political science and other disciplines, see Michèle Lamont. Forthcoming. *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [9] This is exemplified by the reading of recent developments in comparative historical sociology offered by Ann S. Orloff, Julia Adams, and Elisabeth Clemens (eds.), 2005. *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- [10] I thank Peter A. Hall and Patricia Craig for making these figures available to me. There were compiled from various sources.
- [11] See Cathie Jo Martin and Kathleen Thelen. 2007. "The State and Coordinated Capitalism: Contributions of the Public Sector to Social Solidarity in Postindustrial Societies." *World Politics*, 60 (1): 1-36. Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont. Forthcoming. *Successful Societies: Health, Culture, and Institutions.* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Lamont, *op. cit.*