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What is This?

On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason

Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant

C ULTURAL IMPERIALISM RESTS on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such.[1] Thus, just as in the 19th century a certain number of supposedly philosophical questions being debated as universal throughout Europe and beyond originated, as Fritz Ringer (1969) has brilliantly shown, in the historical particularities (and conflicts) proper to the singular universe of German academics, so today numerous topics directly issuing from the intellectual confrontations relating to the social particularity of American society and of its universities have been imposed, in apparently de-historicized form, upon the whole planet. These *common-places*, in the Aristotelian sense of notions or theses *with which* one argues but *about which* one does not argue, or, put another way, these presuppositions of discussion which remain undiscussed, owe much of their power to convince to the fact that, circulating from academic conferences to bestselling books, from semi-scholarly journals to expert's evaluations, from commission reports to magazine covers, they are present everywhere simultaneously, from Berlin to Tokyo and from Milan to Mexico, and are powerfully supported and relayed by those allegedly neutral channels that are international organizations (such as the OECD or the European Commission) and public policy think tanks (such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Saint-Simon Foundation).[2]

The neutralization of the historical context resulting from the international circulation of texts and from the correlative forgetting of their originating historical conditions produces an apparent universalization further abetted by the work of 'theorization'. A kind of fictional axiomatization fit to produce the illusion of a pure genesis, the game of preliminary

definitions and deductions aimed at substituting the appearance of logical
necessity for the contingency of de-negated sociological necessities, tends
to obfuscate the historical roots of a whole ensemble of questions and
notions that will thus be called philosophical, sociological, historical or
political, depending on the field of reception. Thus planetarized, or
globalized in a strictly geographical sense, by this uprooting at the same
time as they are de-particularized by the effect of false rupture effected by
conceptualization, these commonplaces of the great new global vulgate that
endless media repetition progressively transforms into universal common
sense manage in the end to make one forget that they have their roots in the
complex and controversial realities of a particular historical society, now
tacitly constituted as model for every other and as yardstick for all things.

Such is the case for instance with the woolly and spongy debate around
'multiculturalism', a term which in Europe has been used mainly to
designate cultural pluralism in the civic sphere while in the USA it refers
– if in distorted and veiled forms – to the enduring sequelae of the exclusion
of blacks and to the crisis of the national myth of the 'American dream'
correlative to the generalized increase in inequalities over the past two
decades.[3] This is a crisis that the word 'multicultural' conceals by restrict-
ing it artificially just to the academic microcosm and by expressing it in an
ostensibly 'ethnic' idiom when what is principally at stake is not the
recognition of marginalized cultures by academic canons but access to the
instruments of (re)production of the middle and upper classes – and, first
among them, to the university – in the context of massive and multifarious
state retrenchment.[4]

From this example, one can see in passing that, among the cultural
products now being diffused on a planetary scale, the most insidious are not
apparently systematic theories (such as 'the end of history' or 'globalization')
and philosophical worldviews (or those that claim to be such, as with
'postmodernism'), as these are quite easy to spot. Rather, they are those
isolated and apparently technical terms such as *'flexibilité'* (or its British
equivalent, 'employability') which, because they encapsulate and commu-
nicate a whole philosophy of the individual and of social organization, are
well-suited to functioning as veritable political codewords and mottoes (in
this case: the downsizing and denigration of the state, the reduction of social
protection and the acceptance of the generalization of casual and precarious
labour as a fate, nay a boon).

We would need here also to analyse, in all of its presuppositions and
implications, the strongly polysemic notion of 'globalization' which has the
effect, if not the function, of submerging the effects of imperialism in
cultural ecumenism or economic fatalism and of making transnational
relationships of power appear as a neutral necessity. Thanks to a symbolic
inversion based on the naturalization of the schemata of neo-liberal thought,
whose dominance has been imposed for some 20 years by the relentless
sniping of conservative think tanks and their allies in the political and
journalistic fields (see Dixon, 1997; Grémion, 1989, 1995; Smith, 1991), the

refashioning of social relations and cultural practices in advanced societies after the US pattern – founded on the pauperization of the state, the commodification of public goods and the generalization of social insecurity – is nowadays accepted with resignation as the inevitable outcome of the evolution of nations, when it is not celebrated with a sheepish enthusiasm eerily reminiscent of the infatuation for America that the Marshall Plan aroused in a devastated Europe half a century ago.[5]

A number of related themes recently making an appearance on the European intellectual scene, and especially on the Parisian scene, have thus crossed the Atlantic in broad daylight or have been smuggled in under cover of the revived influence enjoyed by the products of American research, such as 'political correctness' – paradoxically used, in French intellectual circles, as an instrument of reprobation and repression against every subversive impulse, especially feminist or gay – or the moral panic over the 'ghettoization' of so-called 'immigrant' neighbourhoods, or, again, the moralism that insinuates itself everywhere, through an ethical vision of politics, the family, etc., leading to a kind of principled depoliticization of social and political problems, thereby stripped of any reference to any kind of domination, or, finally, the opposition, that has become canonical in those regions of the intellectual field closed to cultural journalism, between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' which, founded on an eclectic, syncretic and, most often, dehistoricized and highly approximate re-reading of a platoon of French and German authors, is in the process of being imposed in its American form upon Europeans themselves.[6]

We would need to give special attention to and examine in some detail the debate which currently opposes the 'liberals' to the 'communitarians'[7] (words directly *transcribed*, and not translated, from the English) as an exemplary illustration of the effect of *false rupture* and *false universalization* produced by the shift to the register of discourse possessing philosophical pretensions: *item*, founding definitions signalling an apparent break with the historical particularisms relegated to the background of the thought of the historically situated and dated thinker (how could one not see, for example, as has many times been suggested, that the dogmatic character of Rawls's argument for the priority of basic liberties is explained by the fact that he tacitly attributes to the parties in the originating situation a latent ideal which is none other than his own, that of an American academic attached to an ideal vision of American democracy? [see Hart, 1975]); *item*, anthropo-logical presuppositions that are anthropologically unjustified but endowed with all the *social* authority of the neo-marginalist economic theory from which they are borrowed; *item*, pretension to rigorous deduction which allows one to string in formal fashion unfalsifiable consequences without ever being exposed to the slightest empirical test; *item*, ritual and derisory alternatives between the atomistic individualists and the holistic collec-tivists – so visibly absurd that 'holistic-individualists' have to be invented to accommodate Humboldt – or the 'atomistic-collectivists'; all of this in an extraordinary *jargon*, a terrible (and terrifying) international *lingua franca*

which allows one to drag along all of the particularities and the particular-isms associated with national traditions of philosophy and politics without ever taking them consciously into account (such as, for instance, when a French author takes care to write *liberty* in brackets after the word '*liberté*' but accepts without discussion such conceptual barbarisms as the opposi-tion between the '*procédurel*' and the '*substantiel*'). No doubt this debate, and the 'theories' that oppose themselves in it, between which it would be vain to try to introduce a political choice, owes part of its success among philosophers – mainly conservative (and especially Catholic) philosophers – to the fact that it tends to reduce politics to morality: the vast discourse, skilfully neutralized and politically derealized, that it has elicited is a timely successor to the great German tradition of Philosophical Anthro-pology, this noble and falsely profound discourse of denegation (*Vernei-nung*) which has for so long formed a screen and an obstacle to the scientific analysis of the social world wherever (German) philosophy could assert its domination.[8]

To turn to a domain closer to political realities, a debate such as that swirling around 'race' and identity has given rise to similar, if more brutal, ethnocentric intrusions. A historical representation, born from the fact that the American tradition superimposes on an infinitely more complex social reality a rigid dichotomy between whites and blacks, can even impose itself in countries where the operative principles of vision and division of ethnic differences, codified or practical, are quite different and which, like Brazil, were until recently considered as counter-examples to the 'American model' (according to the classic study by Degler, 1995). Carried out by Americans and by Latin Americans trained in the USA, most of the recent research on ethnoracial inequality in Brazil strives to prove that, contrary to the image that Brazilians have of their own nation, the country of the 'three sad races' (indigenous peoples, blacks descended from slaves and whites issued from colonization and from the waves of European immigration) is no less 'racist' than others and that Brazilian 'whites' have nothing to envy their North American cousins on this score. Worse yet, Brazilian *racismo mascarado* should by definition be regarded as more perverse precisely on account of being dissimulated and denegated. This is the claim of Afro-American political scientist Michael Hanchard in *Orpheus and Power* (1994):[9] by applying North American racial categories to the Brazilian situation, this book makes the particular history of the US Civil Rights Movement into the universal standard for the struggle of all groups oppressed on grounds of colour (or caste). Instead of dissecting the constitution of the Brazilian ethnoracial order according to its own logic, such inquiries are most often content to replace wholesale the national myth of 'racial democracy' (as expressed for instance in the works of Gilberto Freire, e.g. 1978) by the myth according to which all societies are 'racist', including those within which 'race' relations seem at first sight to be less distant and hostile. From being an analytic tool, the concept of racism becomes a mere instrument of accusation; under the guise of science, it is the logic of the trial which

asserts itself (and ensures book sales, for lack of success based on intellectual esteem).[10]

In a classic article published 30 years ago, the anthropologist Charles Wagley (1965) showed that the conception of 'race' in the Americas admits of several definitions according to the weight granted to descent, physical appearance (itself not confined to skin colour), and to sociocultural status (occupation, income, education, region of origin, etc.), depending on the history of intergroup relations and conflicts in the different geographic zones. Americans in the USA are alone in defining 'race' strictly on the basis of descent, and this only in the case of African-Americans: one is 'black' in Chicago, Los Angeles or Atlanta, not by skin colour but for having one or more ancestors identified as blacks, that is to say, at the end of the regression, as slaves. The USA is the only modern society to apply the 'one-drop rule' and the principle of 'hypodescent', according to which the children of a mixed union find themselves automatically assigned to the inferior group – here the blacks, and only them. In Brazil, racial identity is defined by reference to a *continuum* of 'colour', that is, by use of a flexible or fuzzy principle which, taking account of physical traits such as skin colour, the texture of hair, and the shape of lips and nose, and of class position (notably income and education), generates a large number of intermediate and partly overlapping categories (over a hundred of them were recorded by the 1980 Census) and does not entail radical ostracization or a stigmatization without recourse or remedy. Evidence for this is provided by the segregation indices sported by Brazilian cities, strikingly lower than those for US metropolitan areas, and the virtual absence of the two typically US forms of ethnoracial violence: lynching and urban rioting (see Telles, 1995; Reid, 1992). Quite the opposite in the USA where there exists no socially and legally recognized category of '*métis*' (people of mixed-race) (Davis, 1991; Williamson, 1980). In this case we are faced with a division that is closer to that between *definitively defined and delimited castes* (proof is the exceptionally low rate of intermarriage: fewer than 2 percent of African-American women contract 'mixed' unions, as against about half of the women of Latino or Asian origin): a caste division that one strives to conceal by submerging it within the universe of differentiating visions 'revisioned' through US lenses by means of 'globalization'.

How are we to account for the fact that 'theories' of 'race relations' which are but thinly *conceptualized transfigurations*, endlessly refurbished and updated to suit current concerns, of the most commonly used racial stereotypes that are themselves only primary justifications of the domination of whites over blacks[11] in one society, could be tacitly (and sometimes explicitly) raised to the status of universal standard whereby every situation of ethnic domination must be analysed and measured?[12] The fact that this racial (or racist) sociodicy was able to 'globalize' itself over the recent period, thereby losing its outer characteristics of legitimating discourse for domestic or local usage, is undoubtedly one of the most striking proofs of the symbolic dominion and influence exercised by the USA over every kind of

scholarly and, especially, semi-scholarly production, notably through the power of consecration they possess and through the material and symbolic profits that researchers in the dominated countries reap from a more or less assumed or ashamed adherence to the model derived from the USA. For one may say, with Thomas Bender (1997: 7), that the products of American research have acquired 'an international stature and a power of attraction' comparable with those of 'American cinema, pop music, computer software and basketball'.[13] Symbolic violence is indeed never wielded but with a form of (extorted) complicity on the part of those who submit to it: the 'globalization' of the themes of American social doxa, or of its more or less sublimated transcription in semi-scholarly discourse, would not be possible without the collaboration, conscious or unconscious, directly or indirectly interested, of all the *passeurs*, 'carriers' and importers of designer or counterfeit cultural products (publishers, directors of cultural institutions such as museums, operas, galleries, journals, etc.) who, in the country itself or in target countries, propound and propagate, often in good faith, American cultural products, and all the American cultural authorities which, without being explicitly concerted, accompany, orchestrate and sometimes even organize the process of collective conversion to the new symbolic Mecca.[14]

But all these mechanisms which have the effect of *facilitating* the actual 'globalization' of American problems, thereby verifying the Americano-centric belief in 'globalization' understood, quite simply, as the *Americanization* of the Western world and, through outward expansion, of the entire universe, these mechanisms are not enough to explain the tendency of the American worldview, scholarly or semi-scholarly, to impose itself as a universal point of view, especially when it comes to issues, such as that of 'race', where the particularity of the American situation is particularly flagrant and particularly far from being exemplary. One would obviously need to invoke here also the driving role played by the major American philanthropic and research foundations in the diffusion of the US racial doxa within the Brazilian academic field at the level of both representations and practices. Thus, the Rockefeller Foundation and similar organizations fund a programme on 'Race and Ethnicity' at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro as well as the Centre for Afro-Asiatic Studies of the Candido Mendes University (and its journal *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*) so as to encourage exchanges of researchers and students. But the intellectual current flows in one direction only. And, as a condition for its aid, the Rockefeller Foundation requires that research teams meet US criteria of '*affirmative action*', which poses insuperable problems since, as we have seen, the application of the white/black dichotomy in Brazilian society is, to say the least, hazardous.

Alongside the role of philanthropic foundations, we must finally include the internationalization of academic publishing among the factors that have contributed to the diffusion of 'US thought' in the social sciences. The growing integration of the publishing of English-language academic

books (nowadays sold, often by the same houses, in the USA, in the different countries of the former British Commonwealth, but also in the smaller, polyglot, nations of the European Union such as Sweden and the Netherlands, and in the societies most directly exposed to American cultural domination) and the erosion of the boundary between academic and trade publishing have helped encourage the putting into circulation of terms, themes and tropes with strong (real or hoped for) market appeal which, in turn, owe their power of attraction simply to the fact of their very wide diffusion. For example, Basil Blackwell, the large, half-commercial and half-academic publishing house (what the Anglo-Saxons call a 'crossover press'), does not hesitate to impose titles on its authors which are in accord with this new planetary common sense which it contributes to forging under the guise of echoing it. Such is the case with the collection of texts on new forms of urban poverty in Europe and America assembled in 1996 by the Italian sociologist Enzo Mingione: it was dressed up with the title *Urban Poverty and the Underclass* (1996) against the opinion and will of its editor and of several of the contributors since the entire book tends to demonstrate the vacuity of the notion of 'underclass' – Blackwell even refused to put the term in inverted commas.[15] Faced with the overly manifest reticence of its authors, it is all too easy for Basil Blackwell to claim that an enticing title is the only way to avoid a high selling price which would in any case kill the book in question. Thus it is that decisions of pure book marketing orient research and university teaching in the direction of homogenization and submission to fashions coming from America, when they do not fabricate wholesale 'disciplines' such as Cultural Studies, this mongrel domain, born in England in the 1970s, which owes its international dissemination (which is the whole of its existence) to a successful publishing policy. Thus the fact, for instance, that this 'discipline' does not exist in the French university and intellectual fields did not prevent Routledge from publishing a compendium entitled *French Cultural Studies*, on the model of *British Cultural Studies* (there are also volumes of *German Cultural Studies* and *Italian Cultural Studies*). And one may forecast that, by virtue of the principle of ethnico-editorial parthenogenesis in fashion today, we shall soon find in bookstores a handbook of *French-Arab Cultural Studies* to match its cross-channel cousin, *Black British Cultural Studies* which appeared in 1997 (but bets remain open as to whether Routledge will dare *German-Turkish Cultural Studies*).

Yet all of these factors taken together cannot completely explain the hegemony that US production exercises over the intellectual world market. This is where we must take into account the role of some of those in charge of conceptual *'import–export'*, those mystified mystifiers who can transport unknowingly the hidden – and often accursed – portion of the cultural products which they put into circulation. What are we to think, indeed, of those American researchers who travel to Brazil to encourage the leaders of the *Movimento Negro* to adopt the tactics of the Afro-American Civil Rights Movement and to denounce the category of *pardo* (an intermediary term

between *branco*, white, and *preto*, black, which designates people of mixed physical appearance) in order to mobilize all Brazilians of African *descent* on the basis of a dichotomous opposition between 'Afro-Brazilians' and 'whites' at the very time when, in the USA, people of mixed origin, including so-called 'blacks', are mobilizing to obtain from the American state (beginning with the Census Bureau) official recognition of 'mixed-race' Americans by ceasing to categorize them forcibly under the single label 'black' (DaCosta, 1999; Spencer, 1997)? Such discordance justifies us in thinking that the recent as well as unexpected discovery of the 'globalization of race' (Winant, 1994, 1995) results, not from a sudden convergence of forms of ethnoracial domination in the various countries, but from the quasi-universalization of the US *folk-concept* of 'race' as a result of the worldwide export of US scholarly categories.

The same demonstration could be made in respect of the international diffusion of the true–false concept of *'underclass'* which, through an effect of transcontinental *allodoxia*, has been imported by those old-world sociologists most desirous to experience a second intellectual youth by surfing on the wave of popularity for 'made in America' concepts.[16] To summarize quickly, European researchers hear 'class' and believe that reference is being made to a new position in the structure of urban social space while their American colleagues hear 'under' and think of a heap of dangerous and immoral poor people in a resolutely Victorian and racistoid perspective. Yet, Paul Peterson, a distinguished professor of political science at Harvard University and director of the Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass of the Social Science Research Council (financed yet again by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations), leaves no grounds for uncertainty or ambiguity when he summarizes approvingly the findings of a major conference on the underclass held in Chicago in 1990 in terms that hardly need to be commented upon:

> ... 'class' is the least interesting half of the word. Although it implies a relationship between one social group and another, the terms of that relationship are left undefined until combined with the familiar word 'under' ... 'under' suggests the lowly, passive, and submissive, yet at the same time the disreputable, dangerous, disruptive, dark, evil, and even hellish. And, apart from these personal attributes, it suggests subjection, subordination, and deprivation. (Jencks and Peterson, 1991: 3)

In every national intellectual field, *'passeurs'* or carriers (sometimes just one, sometimes several) have come forth to take up this scholarly myth and to reformulate in these alienated terms the question of the relations between poverty, immigration and segregation in their country. One loses count of the articles and works that purport to prove – or, what amounts almost to the same thing, to disprove – with fine positivist diligence, the existence of this 'group' in such and such a society, town or neighbourhood, on the basis of empirical indicators often badly constructed and badly correlated among

themselves (to give just three examples among many, see Dangschat, 1994; Rodant, 1992; Whelm, 1996). To pose the question of whether there exists an 'underclass' (a term that some French sociologists have not hesitated to translate as '*sous-classe*', no doubt anticipating the introduction of the concept of '*sous-hommes*', *Untermensch*) in London, Lyons, Leiden or Lisbon, is to suppose at the least, on the one hand, that the term is endowed with minimal analytic consistency and, on the other, that such a 'group' actually exists in the USA.[17] Now, the semi-journalistic and semi-scholarly notion of 'underclass' is as devoid of semantic coherence as it is of social existence. The incongruous populations that American researchers usually regroup under this term – welfare recipients and the long-term unemployed, unmarried mothers, single-parent families, rejects from the school system, criminals and gang members, drug addicts and the homeless, when they do not refer to all ghetto dwellers in bulk – owe being included in this catch-all category to one fact and one fact only: they are perceived as living denials of the 'American dream' of individual success. The kindred 'concept' of 'exclusion' is commonly used, in France and in a growing number of other European countries (notably under the influence of the European Commission), at the intersection of the political, journalistic and scientific fields with the similar functions of dehistoricization and depoliticization. All of which gives us an idea of the inanity of the project to retranslate a non-existent notion into another just as unreliable (Herpin, 1993).

Indeed, the 'underclass' is but a fictional group, produced on paper by the classifying practices of those scholars, journalists and related experts in the management of the (black urban) poor who share in the belief in its existence because it is well-suited to give renewed scientific legitimacy to some and a politically and commercially profitable theme to mine for the others (Wacqant, 1996a). Inept and unsuited in the American case, the imported concept adds nothing to the knowledge of European societies. For the agencies and methods for the government of misery are vastly discrepant on the two sides of the Atlantic, not to mention differences in ethnic divisions and their political status.[18] It follows that 'problem populations' are neither defined nor treated in the same manner in the USA and in the different countries of the Old World. Yet most extraordinary of all is the fact that, in keeping with a paradox that we already encountered with regard to other false concepts of the globalized vulgate, the notion of 'underclass' which has come to us from America was in fact born in Europe, as was that of the ghetto which it serves to obfuscate due to the strict political censorship that weighs upon research on urban and racial inequality in the USA. It was the economist Gunnar Myrdal who coined the term in the 1960s, based on the Swedish *onderklass* (Myrdal, 1963). But his intention then was to describe the process of marginalization of the lower segments of the working class in rich countries in order to criticize the ideology of the generalized embourgeoisement of capitalist societies. One can see here how profoundly the detour through America can transform an idea: from a structural concept

aiming to question the dominant representation of society emerges a be-havioural category perfectly suited to reinforcing that representation by imputing to the 'anti-social' conduct of the most disadvantaged responsi-bility for their own dispossession.

These misunderstandings are due in part to the fact that the transat-lantic 'carriers' of the different importing intellectual fields who produce, reproduce and circulate all these (false) problems, while levying in the process their 'cut' of the attendant material or symbolic profits, are exposed to a double heteronomy owing to their position and to their scholarly and political habitus. On the one hand, they look towards America, the supposed home of social and scientific (post-) 'modernity', but they are themselves dependent on American scholars who export intellectual products (often soiled and faded) abroad because they do not usually have direct and specific knowledge of American institutions and culture. On the other hand, they lean towards journalism, towards the seductions it offers and the immediate success it procures and, consequently, towards the themes that crop up at the intersection of the fields of media and politics, right to the point of maximum yield on the external market (as would be shown by an enumeration of the complacent reviews that their works receive in the mass circulation magazines). Whence their predilection for *soft* problematics, neither truly journalistic (they adorned themselves with concepts) nor completely scientific (they pride themselves on being in symbiosis with 'the actors' point of view'), which are nothing but the semi-scholarly retranslation of the salient social problems of the day into an idiom imported from the USA (ethnicity, identity, minority, community, fragmentation, etc.) and which follow each other according to an order and tempo dictated by the media: youths of the *banlieue*, the xenophobia of the declining working class, the maladjustment of high-school and university students, urban violence and so on. These sociologist-journalists, always ready and eager to comment on current affairs and every so-called *'fait de societé'* in a language at once accessible and 'modernist', and therefore often perceived as vaguely progressive (in relation to the 'archaisms' of classical European thought), contribute in a particularly paradoxical way to the imposition of a vision of the world which, surface appearances notwithstanding, is far from being incompatible with those produced and conveyed by the great international think tanks, more or less directly plugged into the spheres of economic and political power.

As for those in the USA who, often without realizing it, are engaged in this huge international cultural import–export business, they occupy for the most part dominated positions in the American field of power and even in the intellectual field. Just as the products of America's big cultural industry like jazz or rap, or the commonest food and clothing fashions, like jeans, owe part of the quasi-universal seduction they wield over youth to the fact that they are produced and worn by subordinate minorities (see Fantasia, 1994), so the topics of the new world vulgate no doubt derive a good measure of their symbolic efficacy from the fact that, supported by specialists from

disciplines perceived to be marginal or subversive, such as Cultural Studies, Minority Studies, Gay Studies or Women's Studies, they take on, in the eyes of writers from the former European colonies for example, the allure of messages of liberation. Indeed, cultural imperialism (American or otherwise) never imposes itself better than when it is served by progressive intellectuals (or by 'intellectuals of colour' in the case of racial inequality) who would appear to be above suspicion of promoting the hegemonic interests of a country against which they wield the weapons of social criticism. Thus, the various articles that compose the summer 1996 issue of the journal *Dissent*, mouthpiece of the democratic 'old left' of New York, devoted to 'Embattled Minorities around the Globe: Rights, Hopes, Threat', projects upon the whole of humankind, with the humanist goodwill characteristic of certain academic 'left', not only US liberal common sense but the notion of *minority* (we should always keep the English word to remind ourselves that we are dealing with a folk-concept imported into theory – and yet again one of European origin)[19] which presupposes precisely that which needs to be demonstrated: that categories cut out from within a given nation-state on the basis of 'cultural' or 'ethnic' traits have the desire or the right to demand civic and political recognition *as such*. But the forms under which individuals seek to have their collective existence and membership recognized by the state vary at different times and places as functions of historic traditions and they always constitute a stake of struggle in history. In this manner, an apparently rigorous and generous comparative analysis can, without its authors even realizing it, contribute to making a problematic made by and for Americans seem to be universal.

We thus come upon a double paradox. In the struggle for the monopoly over the production of the vision of the social world that is universally recognized as universal, where it nowadays occupies an eminent, not to say pre-eminent, position, the USA is certainly exceptional, but its exceptionalism does not reside where the national sociodicy and social science agree in placing it, namely, in the fluidity of a social order that offers extraordinary opportunities for mobility (especially in comparison with the supposedly rigid social structures of the Old World): the most rigorous comparative studies converge to conclude that the USA does not fundamentally differ in this respect from other industrial nations even though the span of class inequality is notably wider in America.[20] If the USA is truly exceptional, in accordance with the old Tocquevillian theme untiringly renewed and periodically updated, it is above all for the *rigid dualism* of its racial division. Even more so, it is for its capacity to impose as universal that which is most particular to itself while passing off as exceptional that which makes it most common.

If it is true that the dehistoricization that almost inevitably results from the migration of ideas across national boundaries is one of the factors contributing to derealization and false universalization (as, for example, with theoretical '*faux amis*'), then only a genuine history of the genesis of ideas about the social world, combined with an analysis of the social

mechanisms of the international circulation of those ideas, could lead intellectuals, in this domain as elsewhere, to a better mastery of those instruments with which they argue without taking the trouble to argue beforehand about them.[21]

Notes

This article is a translation of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, 'Sur les ruses de la raison imperialiste', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 121-2 (March): 109–18 (by Derek M. Robbins and Loïc Wacquant, August 1998).

1. It bears stressing at the outset to avoid any misunderstanding – and to ward off the predictable accusation of 'anti-Americanism' – that nothing is more universal than the pretension to the universal or, more accurately, to the universalization of a particular vision of the world; and that the demonstration sketched here would hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for other fields and other countries (notably for France: see Bourdieu, 1992).

2. Among the books that attest to this rampant McDonaldization of thought, one may cite the elitist jeremiad of Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), immediately translated into French by Julliard under the title *L'Âme désarmée* ('The Disarmed Soul', 1987) and the angry pamphlet by the neo-conservative Indian immigrant (and biographer of Reagan) based at the Manhattan Institute, Dinesh DiSouza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991) translated into French with the title *L'Éducation contre les libertés* ('Education against Freedom', 1993). One of the best indicators for spotting the works partaking of this new intellectual doxa with planetary pretensions is the quite unusual *speed* with which they are translated and published abroad (especially in comparison with scientific works). For an overall native vision of the joys and sorrows of contemporary American academics, see the recent issue of *Daedalus* devoted to 'The American Academic Profession' (no.126 [autumn], 1997), especially B. Clark, 'Small Worlds, Different Worlds: The Uniqueness and Troubles of American Academic Professions', and P. Altbach, 'An International Academic Crisis? The American Professoriate in Comparative Perspective'.

3. See D. Massey and N. Denton, *American Apartheid* (1993); M. Waters, *Ethnic Options* (1990); D.A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (1995); and J. Hochschild, *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1996); for an analysis of all these questions that appropriately spotlights their historical origins and recurrence, see D. Lacorne, *La Crise de l'identité américaine: du melting pot au multiculturalisme* (1997).

4. On the imperative of cultural recognition, see C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994), and the texts collected and presented by T. Goldberg (ed.) *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (1994); on the spoking of the strategies of perpetuation among the US middle class, L. Wacquant, 'La Généralisation de l'insécurité salariale en amérique: restructurations d'entreprises et crise de reproduction sociale' (1996b); the deep malaise of the American middle class is well depicted by K. Newman, *Declining Fortunes* (1993).

5. On 'globalization' as an 'American project', see N. Fligstein, 'Rhétorique et réalités de la "mondialisation" ' (1997); on the ambivalent fascination with America in the post-war period, L. Boltanski, 'America, America . . . le plan Marshall et

l'importation du "management" ' (1981) and R. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (1993).

6. This is not the only case where, by a paradox that displays one of the most typical effects of symbolic domination, a number of topics that the USA exports and imposes across the whole universe, beginning with Europe, have been borrowed from those who now receive them as the most advanced forms of theory.

7. For a bibliography on this sprawling debate, see *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 14(3–4) (1988), special issue, 'Universalism vs Communitarianism: Contemporary Debates in Ethics'.

8. From this point of view, crudely sociological, the dialogue between Rawls and Habermas – of whom it is no exaggeration to say that they are equivalent, except for the philosophical tradition of which they partake – is highly significant (see for example, Habermas, 'Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on Political Liberalism', 1995).

9. There is a powerful antidote to ethnocentric poison on this subject in the work of Anthony Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa and Brazil* (1998), which demonstrates that racial divisions are closely linked to the political and ideological history of the country under consideration, each state creating in a sense the conception of 'race' which suits it.

10. How long will it be before we get a book entitled *Racist Brazil* patterned after the scientifically scandalous *Racist France* of a French sociologist more attentive to the expectations of the field of journalism than to the complexities of social reality? [Translator's note: the authors allude to Michel Wieviorka et al., *La France raciste*, 1993.]

11. James McKee shows in his masterwork, *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective* (1993), on the one hand, that these allegedly scientific theories reproduce the stereotype of the cultural inferiority of blacks and, on the other, that they turned out to be singularly incapable of predicting and then explaining black mobilization in the post-war decades and the race riots of the 1960s.

12. This status of universal standard, of 'Greenwich meridian' in relation to which are evaluated advances and retardations, 'archaisms' and 'modernisms' (the avant-garde), is one of the universal properties of those who symbolically dominate a given universe (see Casanova, 1997).

13. On the importation of the theme of the ghetto in the recent debate about the city and its ills, see L. Wacquant, 'Pour en finir avec le mythe des "cités-ghettos": les différences entre la France et les États-Unis' (1992).

14. There is an exemplary description of the process of transfer of the power of consecration in avant-garde art from Paris to New York in the classic book by Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Impressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (1983).

15. This is not an isolated incident: as this article is going to press, the same publishing house is embroiled in a furious row with the urbanologists Ronald van Kempen and Peter Marcuse to try and get them to change the title of their joint work, *The Partitioned City*, into the more faddish and glitzy, *Globalizing Cities*.

16. As John Westergaard already noted a few years back in his presidential address to the British Sociological Association ('About and Beyond the Underclass:

Some Notes on the Influence of the Social Climate on British Sociology Today',
1992).

17. In taking considerable trouble to argue the obvious, namely, that the concept of
'underclass' does not apply to French cities, Cyprien Avenel (1997) accepts and
reinforces the preconceived idea according to which it has purchase on urban
reality in the USA.

18. These differences have deep historical roots, as attested by a comparative
reading of the work of Giovanna Procacci (on France) and Michael Katz (on the
USA) (Procacci, 1993; Katz, 1997).

19. The problem of language, evoked here in passing, is at once crucial and thorny.
Knowing the precautions which ethnologists take in introducing indigenous words,
one cannot but be surprised – although one is also well aware of all the symbolic
profits that this veneer of modernity provides – that social scientists should stock
their scientific language with so many theoretical *'faux amis'* ('false friends') based
on a mere lexicological facsimile (minority for *minorité*, *profession* for liberal
profession, etc.) without seeing that these morphologically twinned words are
separated by the whole set of differences between the social system in which they
were produced and the new system in which they are introduced. Those most
exposed to the *'faux ami'* fallacy are obviously the British because they speak
apparently the same language, but also because they have often learnt their
sociology in American textbooks, readers and books, and do not have much to
oppose to such conceptual invasion, save extreme epistemological vigilance. (Of
course, there exist strong centres of resistance to American hegemony, as, for
example, in the case of ethnic studies, around the review *Ethnic and Racial Studies*,
directed by Martin Bulmer, and around Robert Miles's research group on racism
and migration at the University of Glasgow. But these alternative paradigms,
concerned to take the specificities of the British ethnoracial order into full
account, are no less defined by opposition to American concepts and their British
derivatives.) It follows that England is structurally predisposed to act as the Trojan
horse by which the notions of American scholarly common sense penetrate the
European intellectual field (it is with intellectual matters as with matters of
economic and social policy). It is in England that the activity of conservative
foundations and mercenary intellectuals has been established the longest, is the
most sustained and the most effective. Proof is the diffusion of the scientific myth of
the 'underclass' as a result of high-profile media interventions of Charles Murray,
expert of the Manhattan Institute and intellectual guru of the libertarian right in the
USA, and of its counterpart, the theme of the 'dependency' of the disadvantaged
upon public aid, which Tony Blair today proposes to reduce drastically in order to
'liberate' the poor from the 'yoke' of assistance, as Clinton did for their American
cousins in the summer of 1996.

20. See notably R. Erickson and J. Goldthorpe, *The Constant Flux: A Study of
Mobility in Industrial Societies* (1992); Erik Olin Wright arrives at the much same
result with a notably different methodology in *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in
Class Inequality* (1997); on the political determinants of the scale of inequalities in
the USA and of their increase over the past two decades, C. Fischer et al.,
Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth (1996).

21. In a work essential for fully appreciating the weight of the historical uncon-
scious that survives, in a more or less misrecognizable and repressed form, in the
scholarly problematics of a country and the historical gravity which gives to

American academic imperialism much of its extraordinary force of imposition, Dorothy Ross (1991) reveals how the American social sciences (economics, sociology, political science and psychology) were erected from the outset upon two complementary dogmas of the national doxa: 'metaphysical individualism' and the idea of a diametric opposition between the dynamism and flexibility of the 'new' American social order, on the one side, and the stagnation and rigidity of 'old' European social formations, on the other. One can find direct retranslations of these two founding dogmas, as for the first, in the ostensibly purified idiom of 'grand' sociological theory, with the canonical attempt by Talcott Parsons to elaborate a 'voluntary theory of action' and, more recently, in the resurgence of so-called 'rational choice theory', and, in the case of the second, in the 'theory of modernization' which reigned supreme over the study of societal change in the three decades after the Second World War and is now making an unexpected return in post-Soviet studies as well as certain strands of 'globalization'.

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