

# American Studies in the Republic of Turkey: A Journey Unfulfilled

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*Abstract:* I trace the origins and development of American Studies in Turkish universities, from its beginnings at Ankara University to the pluralistic discipline that it is today. In the early Fifties and even in the Sixties, much of the teaching was carried out by visiting American professors, with minimal Turkish input; but since that time the Turks mostly run the departments themselves with occasional assistance from American visitors. The departments attract sufficient students, but the subjects for discussion remain predominantly in the field of literature. Perhaps local academics remain a little reluctant to embrace more popular material – for example film – for fear that they might be deemed “un-academic” by their colleagues in other disciplines. To outsiders at least, American Studies remains stuck in late Seventies curricula.

The story of American Studies in Turkey dates from the mid-Fifties when the Fulbright Commission appointed Sidney Burks to teach in the English Language and Literature department of Ankara University. Later in that decade, an American Literature sub-division was established in the English department of the same institution with İrfan Şahinbaş, a noted translator and academic, in the chair. Şahinbaş held the job until his retirement in 1982. Until the mid-Sixties, the fledgling program was supported by visiting Fulbright scholars. In contrast, many local professors believed that the idea of an independent department remained unthinkable (Aytür 1996, 60). A graduate program was established in Ankara in 1966. A decade later, the two departments (English and American Literature) were reorganized into separate departments with the American department officially named the Department of American Language and Literature (Amerikan Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü). In 1982, a new university act reorganized foreign literature departments into divisions of Western Languages and Literatures, with English and American Literature transformed into anabilim dalı (social science branches). This lasted for six years, when the American department was transformed into the Department of American Culture and Literature (Amerikan Kültür ve Edebiyatı), even though many staff members were left wondering whether the focus of the department's attention centered on language or literature. This distinction was never clarified.

During the same decade, other American Literature departments were established at Hacettepe University in Ankara and İstanbul Universities, bringing what Necla Aytür termed "a breath of fresh air" to literary studies rather than language (1996, 61). New departments followed in the subsequent decade at state institutions such as Ege and Dokuz Eylül in İzmir, and

in the private sector at Bilkent and Başkent Universities in Ankara, Kadir Has, Bahçeşehir and Haliç Universities in İstanbul. Separate courses in American Studies within the English Literature program were offered at state universities such as Boğaziçi in İstanbul, and Atatürk in Erzurum in the east of the country.

This is a description of how American Studies under its various local guises came into being in the Republic of Turkey. I want to take the opportunity to expand on the development of the discipline in the Republic, and conclude by making some tentative suggestions about how it could develop in the future. Before I begin, I had better declare my subject position as more of an insider than an outsider. Born in London, England, but a resident of the Republic for nearly three decades, I have taught in three different American Studies departments, one of them for seven years as a full-time instructor. I was secretary of the local American Studies Association of Turkey for two years, and edited the Journal of American Studies of Turkey (JAST) for four further years. Many of the experiences I describe here are based on personal encounters. The essay begins by discussing an alliance between the American government, the Fulbright Commission and local academics. In the post-Korean war era leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the need to strengthen the Republic's loyalty to the West was a top priority for the Americans. The United States provided funding and intellectual expertise to the universities while offering full scholarships for academics to complete their doctorates in America. For local scholars, increased American involvement in education enhanced their efforts to disseminate modernist values designed to bring the Republic up to the intellectual standards set by the West.

Despite surface optimism, this strategy posed more problems than it solved that continue to this day. Most academics received their training in English Literature, and although they made great efforts to participate, they found it difficult to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that viewed American Literature as a subdivision of English Literature. Department chairs such as İrfan Şahinbaş (at Ankara) had not only been trained in the United Kingdom – he was given a scholarship to do graduate work at Cambridge – but many of his younger colleagues also came from an English Literature background. Most English programs in state universities had been established from the mid-Thirties onwards, based on the Oxford University model. Local scholars such as Halide Edip Adıvar, who headed İstanbul's English department after a career as an activist working for Atatürk, published histories of English Literature (in Turkish) that became standard texts countrywide. Although local faculty taught American Literature, they employed pedagogic strategies characteristic of English Departments. Most syllabi comprised a series of canonical text studies in detail, with the emphasis placed on practical critical skills – identifying theme, content, and form. Supplementary courses offered surveys of American history providing the background to the study of literature.

Nonetheless, the American Embassy devoted itself to the difficult task of altering prevailing opinions. It appointed a Cultural Attaché at the Embassy in Ankara in 1943. Donald E. Webster, a journalist, educator, and close confidant of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, had been witness to the country's remarkable transformation. Writing in 1939, he claimed that the progress of reform had been so remarkable that people were "beginning to enjoy education, increasing opportunities for intellectual companionship [...] and participation in community affairs" (Webster 1939,

254). Six years later he professed a willingness to “have this small [sic] but strategically oriented country not only friendly to us, but to think things through in patterns similar to our own” (Ninkovich 1981, 52). In 1950, the Fulbright Commission established its headquarters in Ankara with the aim of participating “in the development of programs relevant to American culture in Turkey” (Ersoy 1956, 2). Note the neocolonialist syntax here: the new programs had to be relevant to the foreign rather than the local cultures. Visiting scholars came and went, initially to Ankara and İstanbul, but subsequently to other major cities around the country. Some stayed beyond the mandatory year to help create new American Literature courses, while working with graduate learners on developing thesis topics (Glazier 1971,).

Despite such initiatives, many visiting scholars found themselves within a curious situation. Their efforts to broaden American Literature initiatives had to take place within an English Literature framework to be accepted by the department. In several American Literature syllabi, there were courses such as a Survey of English Literature, Introduction to the Novel, Drama or Poetry, designed to reinforce the belief that American Literature somehow grew out of English Literature. The source of this belief can be traced back to Atatürk’s language reforms of the Twenties in which all words of Arabic origin were replaced by their Latin equivalents in a conscious attempt to transform the Republic into a secular center of European culture and civilization. Later, this policy was identified with modernism, a turning away from the Ottoman past in an effort to embrace a Western future (Berk Albachten 2015, 170). Through publications such as Adivar’s *History of English Literature* it was possible to embrace the democratic spirit, as well as proving beyond doubt that local academics could emulate their foreign colleagues if they so wished. Fulbrighters were there to accelerate the development

of American Literature programs, but had to assume a subordinate role as far as departmental politics and policies were concerned.

Such structural and pedagogical complexities persist to this day. While staff in state institutions have completed higher degrees in American Studies, in the Republic as well as abroad, this is certainly not the case in the private sector, where up to half of the faculty are English Literature majors. When I worked at two such departments, I had to declare my hand as an English graduate. The curricula for most departments in the state and private sectors contain a fair share of practical courses (speaking, oral presentations, academic writing), plus surveys of English Literature, whose inclusion is justified by claiming that American Literature's preoccupations cannot be understood without a knowledge of English Literature. Some American Literature colleagues would challenge this belief on the grounds that their curricula contain courses such as popular cultures, films, African-American and Latin@ texts, national identities, children's literature and science fiction, which superficially vindicates Aytür's claim that American Studies offers learners a "breath of fresh air" compared to their colleagues in English Literature. Yet perhaps such comments are slightly irrelevant. The courses in children's literature and science fiction exist primarily as window-dressing for a program in which comprehensiveness is identified as a virtue. It is far more important to know American Literature's relationship to British Literature as a way of understanding how the two countries differ. More practically, it means that colleagues who have graduated in English have a role to play in American Literature curricula. Some departments – notably at Hacettepe in Ankara and Ege in İzmir – reject that model and offer 100 percent American Literature courses, with courses ranging from Puritanism to contemporary race issues, but they are the exceptions to the rule.

The teaching style in most departments is roughly the same. The more information at the learners' fingertips, the better they are equipped to participate on an intellectual level with their Western counterparts. They can make judicious selections of information and present it cogently in lecture form (Raw 1999, "Reconstructing" 27-8). The education system has been committed to this form of learning at all levels. While new courses have been introduced, their structure remains the same. Each comprises a series of lectures, quizzes or discussion, with at least two mid-terms and one final examination. At the graduate level, courses require learners to do presentations followed by a thesis. Success depends on content-based criteria – the more comprehensive the thesis, the more likely it is to satisfy the jury's expectations.

Most scholarly publications acknowledge the importance of providing background information designed to enhance the reader's understanding. In a collection published in 2015, under the umbrella title *English Studies: New Perspectives* thirty-three scholars contributed pieces on British or American Literature, with topics ranging from Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko and Zora Neale Hurston. They draw on three principal methodological methods; a) an almost exclusive concentration on a single text or pair of texts; b) a tendency to provide background information; and c) a reluctance to explain their choice of material (Çelikel and Taniyan 2015, *passim*). The fact that the text has been analyzed and situated in its background context is considered sufficient. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this approach, but it does become somewhat repetitive. A glance at back issues of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* reveals a similar tendency: there is a general reluctance to take up the intellectual cudgels and experiment with alternative approaches, let alone speculate about

pedagogical differences in teaching American Studies and English Literature. Hence it is hardly surprising that for some colleagues in different departments both disciplines remain on the disciplinary margins as subdivisions of English Language Learning (ELL).

Several visiting scholars from the U.S., including Fulbrighters, have tried to address this issue by introducing knowledge-based pedagogies, based on the notion that providing learners with information about the target culture will enhance their abilities to make comparisons with their home cultures. Writing in 2003, Benton Jay Komins and David Nicholls advocate the lecture-followed-by-discussion method, in the absence of any local pedagogic precedents for them to follow (72). They spent two years at Bilkent, like Stephanie C. Palmer, who claimed that “the Turkish scholars to whom I have spoken do not have strong ideological motivations for specializing in American literature” (Palmer 2002, 397), but rather spend too much time discussing the alleged “problems” of the discipline rather than discovering the “essence of American culture and nationhood” (Palmer, 396).

All three scholars misread the prevailing conditions in American Studies. Most local colleagues simply do not have the time to address any issues in information-loaded courses taught to large classes. The issue of “American culture and nationhood” is of less interest than “Turkish culture(s) and nationhood,” and tends to come up as a subject for discussion while concentrating on American texts, thereby proving the value of an intercultural approach to the subject. Foreign teachers need to be able to listen as well as teach, to understand the meaning of such discussions for learners, even if they take up only ten minutes of a fifty-minute class period. Evidently, few colleagues have been able (or willing) to make that adjustment. Gönül

Pultar and Ayşe Lahur Kıtrunç describe several of their American colleagues as global agents “not caring about its [the Republic’s] people and systems” and revealing “an ill-disguised attitude of neo-colonialism by publishing about the country, using its resources as raw material for furthering their own academic careers” (2004, 147).

This is not always true. We should appreciate the difficulties experienced by any visiting scholars visiting the Republic for the first time. Superficially, the academic environment of a Turkish university resembles that of a typical American institution, yet there are fundamental questions that are seldom discussed. For example, what is “American culture”? And how does it differ from “Turkish culture”? There are superficial answers that can be gathered through class discussion, but unless visiting scholars ask questions of their local colleagues about Turkish history and its enduring commitment to Western modernist values, they might not grasp the true significance of their learners’ replies. Simply lecturing to learners about American culture and history will not provide the answers.

One way to deal with the difficulties of cultural comparison is to approach American Studies from a transnational standpoint. Pultar believes that this strategy could prompt reflection on the intellectual and academic purpose of the discipline in the Republic: “[It can] register beginnings, discontinuations, and reveals or introduces new works not studied so far” (Pultar 2006, 244). The distinction between comparative and transnational American Studies is significant. In Pultar’s formulation comparative analysis involves one, two or perhaps three cultures – America, Turkey and the United Kingdom, for instance. Transnational American Studies requires us to ponder the significance of texts not originally written in English, as well as texts from the English-

speaking world. The local and the global are separate but represent two sides of the same perceptual coin. We understand more personally what “America” signifies to ourselves as well as others.

In 2012 Tanfer Emin Tunç (Hacettepe) and Bahar Gürsel (Middle East Technical University) published the anthology *The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Turkey and the United States*, a series of interventions in film, literature, consumerism and youth cultures. This was followed three years later by a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, edited by Christopher Rivera and Jennifer A. Reimer, who worked at Bilkent. In a diverse collection of material on Transnational Latin@ Studies, we were left in no doubt that transnationalism involved far more than cultural cooperation. The contributors examined ontological issues (what does it mean to be Latin@?), as well as matters of literary form (what is deemed “poetic” in one territory might not be so in another), and translation (should we embrace alternative strategies when considering the relationship between source and target texts? Or should we approach the translational act as a mosaic of intertexts?). These two recent interventions point the way toward a brighter future for American Studies in Turkey, so long as people are prepared to set aside established concerns and rethink their intellectual positions. It is clear that the academic environment has changed permanently. The internet offers a range of source materials and critical interventions that academics could have only dreamt of a quarter of a century ago. Online communication platforms like Skype can put local scholars in touch with their American colleagues without the necessity for financial support. Projects can be planned transnationally, enabling greater interaction between scholars of different ages and subject specialisms. We might wonder whether the Fulbright program has any real future, unless it is prepared to rethink its purpose transnationally.

Perhaps we need to rethink what the value of American Studies represents for our learners. While broadening their cultural awareness remains important, we should bear in mind that access to American cultural products is far easier compared to the past. We need to reflect on the discipline's capacity to make sense of the world, and be prepared to ask why it should have an impact on learners' lives both inside and outside the classroom. We should make students responsible for their own learning through bottom-up pedagogical strategies rather than top-down. Lectures still have a place in the curriculum, but they should be accompanied by extensive group activities, enabling learners to discuss the material among themselves. For foreign faculty struggling to make sense of local cultural practices, this strategy can reveal a lot about themselves as well as their learners – for example, their capacity to listen, observe and learn as well as teach. Collaboration encourages self-direction as well as improving relationships within the classroom environment: everyone participates rather than sitting passively waiting to be force-fed facts.

This construction of pedagogy can encourage speculation on what seems to be the basic question of any American Studies program: why are we doing it? (Raw 2017, "Forging," 1-5). Experience has revealed some unexpected responses from learners. "Because I like it"; "Because we do different things," or "Because it is fun." While such responses might be deemed unacademic, they form an effective foundation for further abstract speculation on questions such as: "How can studying foreign cultures improve our sense of self-awareness?" This is a difficult question to answer, as it has less to do with knowledge acquisition and more with developing speculative perspectives measured against academically rigorous arguments. American Studies should promote personal speculation as well as historical or political inquiry by encouraging edu-

cators and learners alike, irrespective of their nationality, to share and revise their opinions, not simply discuss them in abstract terms.

Bearing in mind that we do not just engage with American Studies through face-to-face communication, we should place more emphasis on learning from online interactions through social media. We can discover more about our Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram friends and by doing so investigate further the notion of “America” as a social, personal and cultural construction. Such knowledge forms the cornerstone of transnational projects that advances our understanding and engagement with the discipline with minimal financial expenditure

Historically, American Studies in the Turkish Republic committed itself to a unity of purpose both educationally as well as politically, as it sought to strengthen diplomatic relations with the United States as well as its European neighbors. While its commitment to American democracy might not be so strong today – owing to fundamental ideological disagreements between those in power – the Turkish Republic reveals a continuing commitment to the values of the United States (democracy, freedom, pluralism). If these values can be continually spread among learners countrywide, then the discipline has continued value, even in a changing world. We should acknowledge that transnationalism through studying other countries forges alternative constructions combining local and global issues while encouraging us to investigate difference at a psychological as well as a political level. Such awareness not only disseminates pluralism but also reminds us of the responsibilities placed on all of us, whether we are educators, graduates, or undergraduate learners. As my title indicates, this intellectual journey is a never-ending one.

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## NOTES

1 The story of American Studies in Turkey has been told from a variety of perspectives. Necla Aytür, once the head of the American Department at Ankara, prioritizes her institution as the pioneer. Emel Doğramacı, who as Dean of the Division of Western Languages and Literature had presided over the opening of the Hacettepe department, claimed that her department created American Studies rather than American Literature (“Laurence Raw Interviews”). Gülriz Büken simply offers a summary of the departments offering courses (Büken 2006, 1-6).

2 Adivar was best known for her English language account of the Turkish War of Independence and the subsequent revolution (*The Turkish Ordeal*, 1928). Her literary history *İngiliz Edebiyatı Tarihi* (*The History of English Literature*) appeared in 1946. Long out of print, *The Turkish Ordeal* is now accessible online at the University of Kansas.

3 Webster (1901-2003) published a book outlining Atatürk’s reforms in detail for American readers (*The Turkey of Atatürk*). At the age of ninety-seven he appeared as an interviewee in filmmaker Tolga Örnek’s documentary on Atatürk (1998).

4 I can speak from personal experience. As a member of the British Council staff in the mid-1990s, my job was to introduce British Cultural Studies into university departments of English Language and Literature. A Master’s program was created – and continues to this day – but I was told in no uncertain terms that its structure should be shaped by local expectations.

5 At Bilkent University the American Studies curriculum has a major concentration in civilizations and cultures as well as a course on American Studies in a global context. The major claim is that learners will encounter material comparatively (2017, "Welcome").

6 Although there was plenty of material available at the time when they wrote the article, they claim that there was "no paper trail to follow" for their research (Komins and Nicholls 2003, 72).

7 I contributed a piece on representations of the Republic during the Classical Era of the Hollywood studios (Tunç and Gürsel 2012,191-209).