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Preface: Empire – American Studies

Three US presidents on EMPIRE: 1) “I am persuaded no constitution was ever before as well calculated as ours for extensive empire and self-government”; 2) “It would be particularly unwise from political and psychological standpoints to permit limitation of our action to be imposed by any other nation than our own”; 3) “Our frontiers today are on every continent.” These three reflect the thinking of celebrated American presidents: Thomas Jefferson in 1809, Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1960.

The bi-national conference of the Swiss and Austrian Associations for (North) American Studies at Salzburg Seminar, Schloss Leopoldskron, was devoted to an inquiry into many facets of the American Empire, including the question whether such an empire ever existed.

Gore Vidal had no doubts and in his “Requiem for the American Empire” he laconically stated its demise: “On September 16, 1985, when the Commerce Department announced that the United States had become a debtor nation, the American Empire died. The empire was seventy-one years old and had been in ill health since 1968. Like most modern empires, ours rested not so much on military prowess as on economic primacy.” (*The Nation*, January 11, 1986)

There are very few Cold-War-analysts who, especially after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, would not agree that never before in modern history was a power so unrivalled in her military, political, economic and cultural supremacy as the United States after the Second World War. The complexities of the informal empire of the United States was probably best caught by the eminent Norwegian historian and secretary of the Nobel Prize Committee, Geir Lundestad, who defined the Cold-War realm of the United States (in Europe) as Empire by Invitation. In his historiographic last testament, the late historian William Appleman Williams went further in characterizing the American existence per definition “Empire as a Way of Life” (1980).

And, the editors hasten to add, few venues exist better fitting for an analysis of Empire than Salzburg Seminar, itself an outstanding nerve center of an American intellectual empire in Europe since the beginning of the Cold War (see André Kaenel).

In proposing an unprecedented bi-national conference on a theme consisting of only that one word, *Empire*, the Swiss and Austrian Associations found an effective way to exemplify the state of the art here in the Alpine heart of Europe. This conference drew contributions from members within the two sponsoring bodies, plus two well known plenary guests from the USA, literary scholar John Carlos Rowe (California – Irvine) and film historian Lary May (Minnesota).

The essays fall into two complementary and approximately equal categories, labelled *cultural / conceptual studies* and *textual studies*. Among scholars trained by and teaching within English Departments, the traditional locus of American Studies on the Continent, textual studies come as no surprise, but the range of authors studied here shows a remarkable emphasis on African American writers. Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and Edward Bellamy are obvious choices in such a context, with credible extensions into our century to Lewis Mumford and Gore Vidal. But W.E.B. Du Bois, Sutton E. Griggs, and George Schuyler and even Rita Dove as recent Poet-Laureate are not so obvious. Their presence here shows that African American texts are seriously studied here even while specialists in the USA often seem largely preoccupied by polemics. A certain European distance from the scene helps us maintain a broader perspective.

The *Cultural and Conceptual Studies* range widely, of course, but here again a relatively distant *European* perspective proves useful, as in the theoretical piece by Hartwig Isernhagen (Basel) which seeks to define the limits of recent conceptual tendencies (over-)emphasizing *difference*, and as well as contribution to European consciousness raising about the interdependence of the Cold War and the rise of American Studies by André Kaenel (Nancy). The Cold War is also an important concern in a fresh assessment of the occupation of Austria after 1945 by Günter Bischof (University of New Orleans) and Lary May's well documented study of Hollywood's Cold War machinations.

These essays also express a wide range of concerns about successive American imperialistic impositions on both land and people, notably the landscape and Indians in New Mexico by David Spurr (Neuchâtel) and the Chicano minority by Juan-Ignacio Oliva (Tenerife). Enculturation in an earlier and more positive sense is the focus of John G. Blair (Geneva) on the cultural work of antebellum drama. Hannelore Gude Hohensinner (Berlin) draws on her prize-winning Austrian dissertation to study the mafia as a criminal empire.

Taken collectively these pieces exhibit a conceptual vocabulary broadly ranging through postmodern, ethnographical, institutional, hermeneutic, and theoretical concerns. If no orthodoxy reigns in this field at this time, perhaps it never has or should. The quality of the work represented here shows that the precise terms of investigation matter less than the professionalism with which American studies are carried out today in the heart of Europe.

John G. Blair (Geneva) and Reinhold Wagnleitner (Salzburg)